

SCIENCE FICTION AGE

New Sci-Fi Flick:
STARGATE

JOE HALDEMAN:

John Berkey's
Future Visions

FREDERIK POHL:

Ideas for
The Future

**TIME TRAVELING
HIT MAN**

By Robin Wilson

**ALIEN
ENCOUNTER**

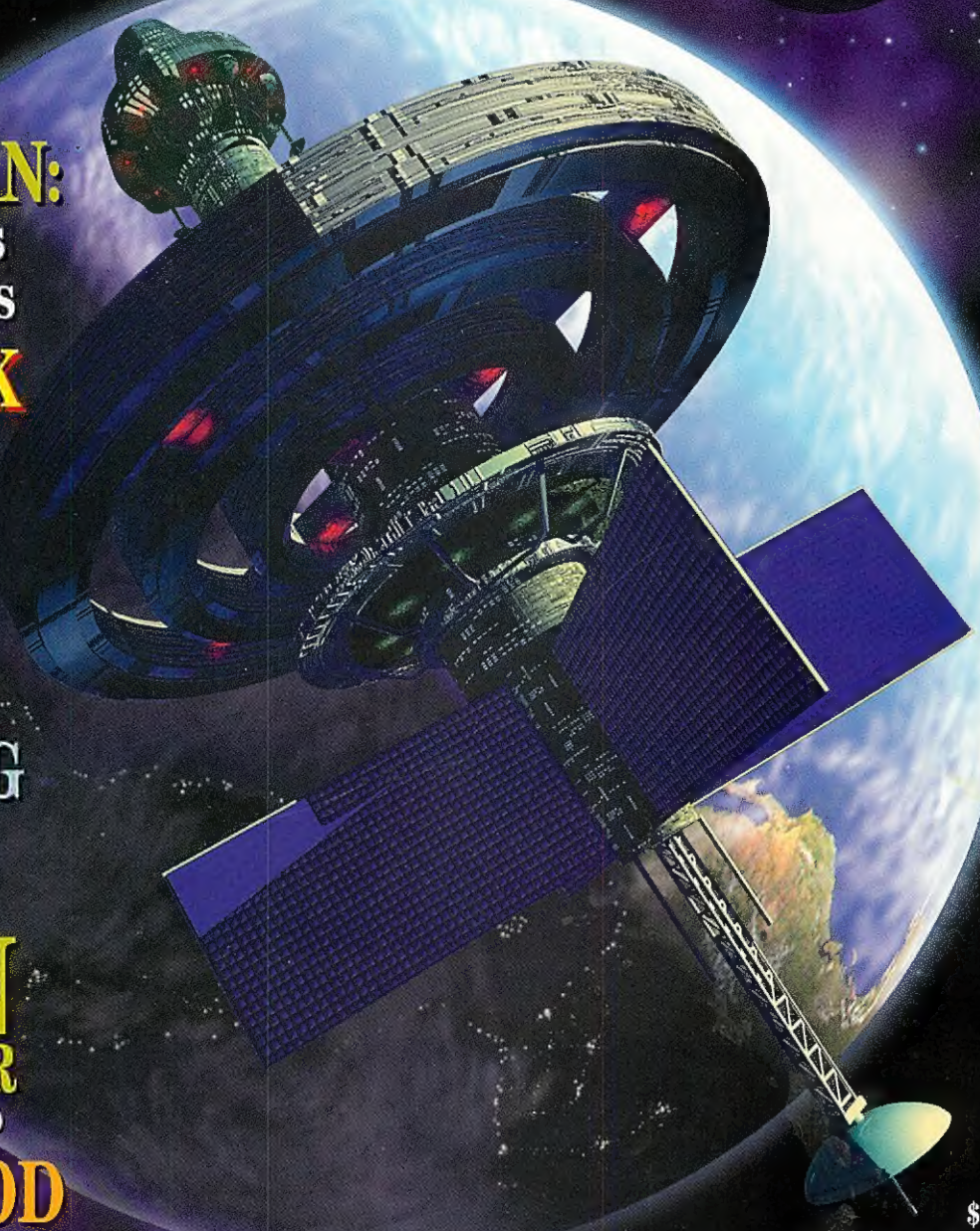
By Adam-Troy Castro

ROBOT GOD

By Daniel Marcus

**CYBERDREAM
ADDICTION**

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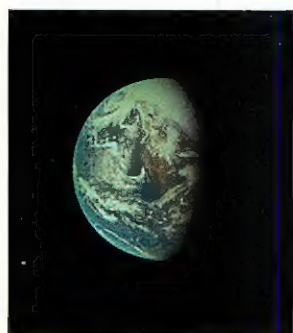
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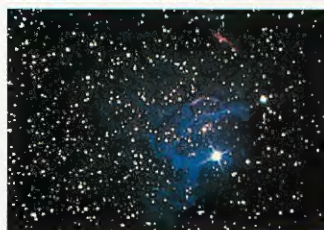


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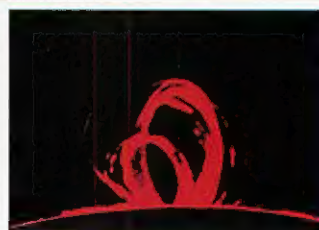


HALF EARTH #400

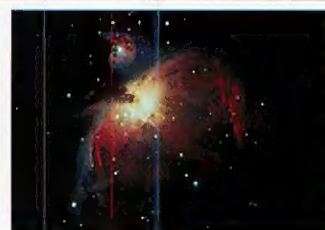
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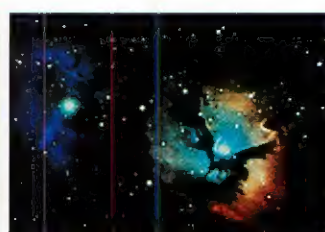
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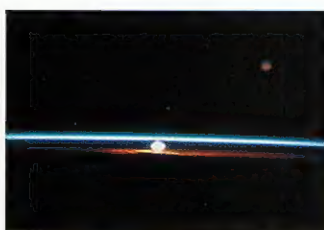
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COVER: A manned space station surveys the forbidding vastness of the universe. Art by George Krauter. ABOVE: StarGate has been one of the most awaited SF films of the season. See Movies, page 18.

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They were the most advanced civilization in the universe, free from want, hunger and fear. If only they could be free from the galaxy's most inept criminals!

UNFORGETTABLE SCIENCE FICTION

ON VIDEO

This Island Earth

Science-fiction exploded all over the screen in the 1950s and you won't get a better sample than *This Island Earth*. Setting the standard for the times with incredible special effects that took two and a half years to produce, this film is an out-of-this-world classic. Two college sweethearts are kidnapped by the mysterious alien Exeter and taken to his home planet so they can use their expertise to help prepare for an interplanetary war. (Color)
#7384 Approx. 90 minutes \$19.98



Wizards

The gifted master of animation Ralph Bakshi provides a different twist on the age-old battle between good and evil in this fantasy adventure. The evil sorcerer-king Blackwolf plans to invade the peaceful realm of his eccentric but kind-hearted brother Avatar. Whipped into a frenzy by Nazi propaganda films and armed with long-forgotten instruments of war, Blackwolf's goblin army begins to terrorize his brother's rainbow paradise. In response, Avatar leads a small band of spirited warriors to destroy Blackwolf with his own magic. (Color)
#7385 Approx. 81 minutes \$19.98



When Worlds Collide

What would happen if another planet were on an intercept course with Earth? If you guessed tidal waves, earthquakes and wholesale destruction you would be right. But what if Earth could prepare one spaceship full of people just in time to escape the destruction and preserve our race? If you think that would make a thrilling and unforgettable science-fiction adventure you would be right again. Released in 1951, *When Worlds Collide* is a disaster film of cosmic proportions that won an Academy Award for Best Visual Effects.
#7386 Approx. 82 minutes \$19.98

Project A-KO

This animated feature is the best in Japanimation. A-KO is a normal teenager...except that within her diminutive frame lies super-human strength. Direct from Japan, this is one of the best-selling features and it has never been offered at this low price. Dubbed in English. CAUTION: Contains nudity. (Color)
#6133 Approx. 86 minutes \$29.98



The Thing

There is an evil asleep beneath the polar ice, and we are ready to bring it into your home. See James Arness as *The Thing* in this 1951 horror thriller. A team of scientists investigate a magnetic disturbance near the North Pole and discover what appears to be a giant flying saucer buried in the ice. Even more amazing is the presence of a man-like thing also frozen with the craft. The scientists take the creature back to the base and thaw it only to find that they now have an almost unstoppable killing machine on their hands. (B&W)
#6992 Approx. 80 minutes \$19.98



The Day The Earth Stood Still

Gort, Klaatu barada nikto! With those words, Patricia Neal saved the Earth from complete destruction in this 1951 science fiction classic. A pioneer in the genre, this film was one of the first to portray aliens from space as advanced supermen with unexplainable powers and technology rather than bug-eyed monsters. Michael Rennie is Klaatu, an inter-galactic policeman who has come to Earth on a mission of friendship, but he finds the people of Earth less than cooperative. When he is fatally wounded, the giant robot Gort begins a mission to destroy the Earth. (B&W)
#4109 Approx. 92 minutes \$19.98



A Brief History Of Time

Over three million books of *A Brief History Of Time* have been sold. And now, this film, which is based on the best selling book by Stephen Hawking, is remarkable. Any film that can answer - Where did the universe come from? Will time ever come to an end? Which came first the chicken or the egg? - is a film for all ages. The exciting mysteries of the universe are explored in this unusual feature film set against the backdrop of Hawking's life story. It is, in Newsweek's words, "An elegant, inspirational and mysterious movie." (Color)
#6715 Approx. 84 minutes \$29.98

The Monolith Monsters

What weird new terror has threatened Earth from outer space? A meteor of glossy black rock has crashed near the small town of San Angelo, and when a local geologist brings a fragment back to his lab for testing, it mysteriously grows like a living thing and turns the hapless scientist to stone. Here's one Saturday Matinee classic you can't miss. Watch out for the towering black *Monolith Monsters!* (B&W)
#6996 Approx. 78 minutes \$19.98



The Rocky Horror Picture Show

This mad mix of classic horror/sci-fi and outrageous fantasy is one of the most popular cult films of all time. Who can forget the time warp? Never before offered at this price, you will want to own this classic and maybe even host your own Rocky Horror midnight movie party! Stars Tim Curry, Barry Bostwick and Susan Sarandon. Limited quantities available.
#3750 Approx. 100 minutes Was \$89.98 Now \$19.98



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Dear Mr. Edelman:

Congratulations on a damn fine magazine!

I noted, when I picked up the May issue at my local book store, that the price had increased by \$.55. (I am a subscriber, but this issue was most likely eaten by a postal machine.) I was at first dismayed. I thought that this would mean a higher cost when I renew. But then I looked, and it was *bigger*. I feel that for more of your magazine, the cost is worth it. I can only hope that the postal machines find something better to chew on in the future.

I have noticed that some readers send lists of their favorite stories. It is my intention to do the same. These are not listed in order or preference.

1) "The Last Robot" (Only because it reminded me of Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War*. I had to go back and read it over again.)

2) "A Dangerous Knowledge"

3) "Two Paths in the Forest Toulemonde"

4) "Bible Stories for Adults No. 46: The Soap Opera"

5) "Simple Souls"

6) "Obituary"

7) "Sherlock the Barbarian"

I like what I like, even though I didn't quite make the same choices as were listed in the May editorial.

I look forward to the future, as do many others. I can only hope that *Science Fiction Age* will be a part of it.

Peace and love,

Dale R. Millson

Dear Mr. Edelman:

I read with interest your "wish list" for your young son's future (Editorial, March 1994). As a mother of a teenage daughter (ulp!), I too hope for a positive future for her, and for all children.

However, I believe that you place too much on the belief that science and scientist will, and would want to, provide us with the solutions, and more importantly, the means to provide these solutions.

I sincerely believe that science can—and has—provided us with many answers to such problems as overpopulation, diseases, even racism and sexism, but these answers are only a part of the solution. The rest must come from us as individuals and groups to deal with the underlying political, economic and social causes of hunger, disease, war, racism, sexism and the serious environmental problems that threaten our world. We need to enact political will and take individual action against these problems as much as seek solutions in a test tube or in outer space.

I do not mean to be harsh, Mr. Edelman. I too, dream and desire a future that is more

Star Trek than cyberpunk. However, I believe that it is important to be realistic in viewing the world's problems—land reform, not food replicators, will go a long way towards solving world hunger. Technology and science is not the only answer. Political will and individual desire to change is necessary as well.

I realize that you, like many, were dreaming of a perfect world, and I too share in that possibility. But only the efforts of all can make these dreams come true.

Thank you, and keep dreaming!

Nancy M. Smith

Dear Editor:

After reading which stories were most popular in *Science Fiction Age*, I thought I'd respond. None of my favorites were on the list. My favorites were "In the Dark," "Two Paths in the Forest Toulemonde," "The Fifteenth Station of the Cross," "Reversals," "Simple Souls," and "Down on the 01 Level." The last two issues' other two stories, "The Biomantic's Last Husband" and "The Ballad of Sally Nutrasweet TM" were pretty good, too.

I would like to see a lot more hardcore science fiction and non-Earth based stories. One fantasy story per issue is fine; I liked a couple of them. My favorite departments are the Essays and the Gallery section.

I would also like to see some more non-traditional stories and essays, i.e., by other cultures, minorities in our culture, feminists, radicals, anarchists and atheists.

Keep up the good work! You've done a good job overall.

Caroline Houle Wessel

Dear *Science Fiction Age*:

I have thoroughly enjoyed your magazine (May 1994). I loved "Where Two Souls Dwell" and "The Biomantic's Last Husband." Even though *Science Fiction Age* seems to be aimed at adults, and I am 11 years old as of May 14th, it is a magazine that is perfect for me. As my reading and understanding skills grow it becomes harder and harder to find a good book or magazine, and I become more excited when I do. Sci-fi is especially hard to find, and *Science Fiction Age* seems to be perfect for sci-fi fans; it seems to be aimed directly at my interests. Sci-fi is almost an obsession to me, and I thank you greatly for publishing this wonder, *Science Fiction Age* magazine.

Fondly,
Lisa Spitalowitz

Readers—please let us know how we're doing at: Letters to the Editor, Science Fiction Age, P. O. Box 369, Damascus, MD 20872.

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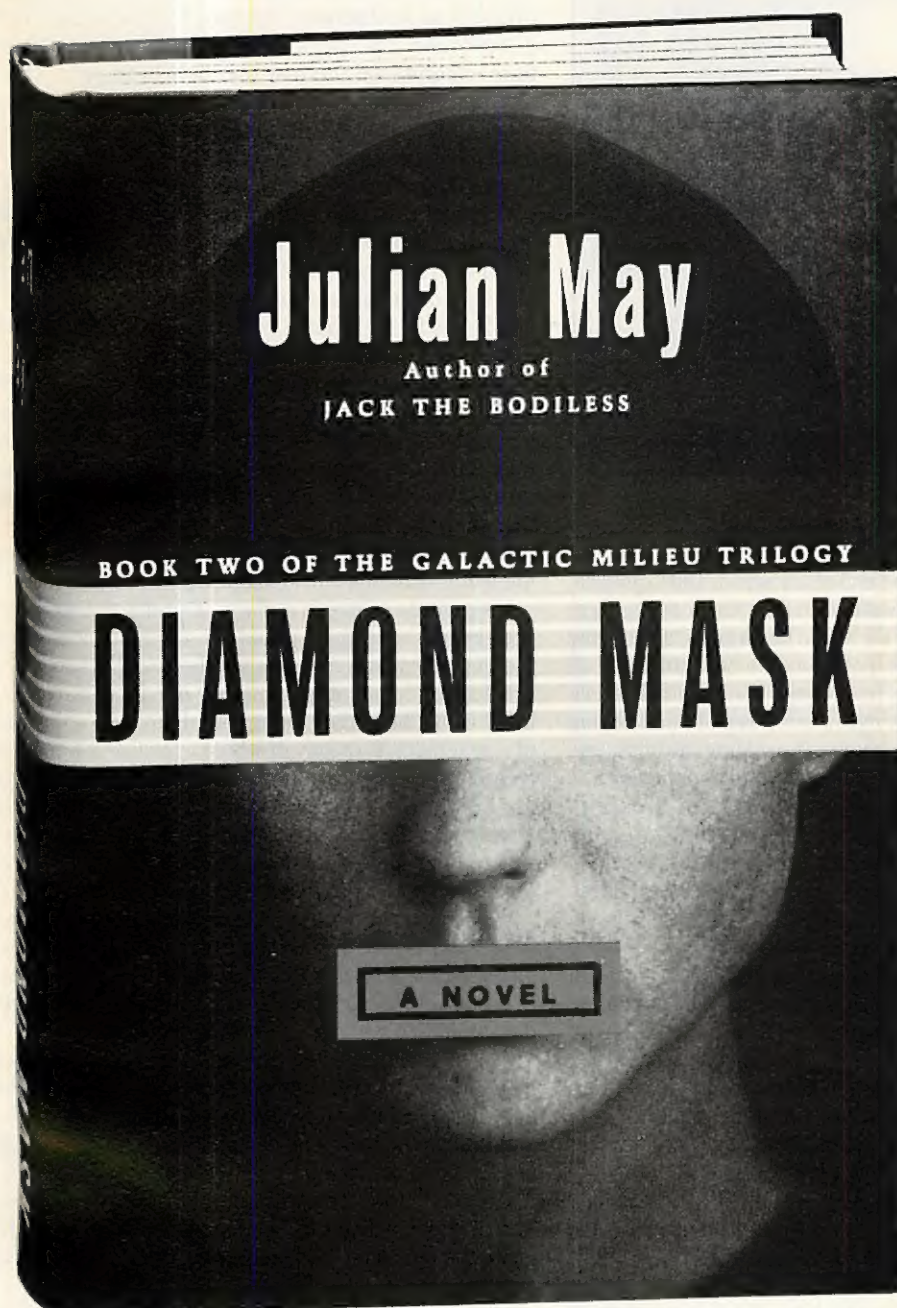
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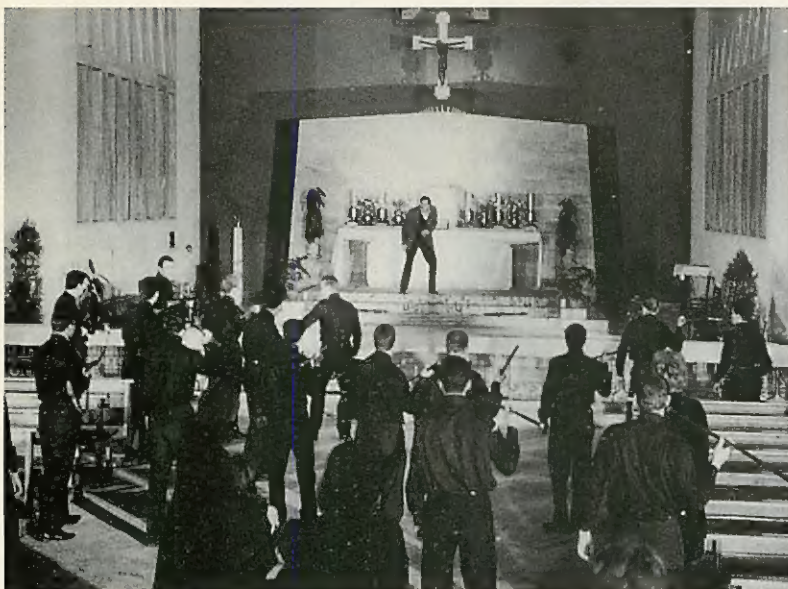
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EDITORIAL

By Scott Edelman

The end of the world just isn't what it used to be—thank goodness!



SF has long inundated us with images of the end of the world, as in this still of Vincent Price from the film The Last Man on Earth.

WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, I WAS TAUGHT TO expect the end of the world. The Commies, you see, wanted to bury us, or so we were told, and we had to be on guard against the rain of atomic missiles that waited in our future. We all knew about death rays from comic books and SF television, from the Saturday morning repeats of Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon that showed how Ming the Merciless and other super villains wanted to blow up the earth.

When I was a small boy growing up in Brooklyn, Nikita Khrushchev was my Ming the Merciless. We were taught how to survive the dastardly sneak attack which we were all made to believe was inevitable. We children had to be vigilant. Our teachers drilled us in the survival skill of crawling under our wooden desks, where we'd tuck our heads between our knees. Walking to and from school each day, I would pass apartment buildings marked with the orange signs that deemed them suitable fall-out shelters, where I would be safe from Commie missiles. We believed them when they told us this. But then, we were kids. We also believed in the monsters under our bed, and that they could not get us if we made sure our feet did not stick out from under the covers.

Our society doesn't do that sort of silly training any longer. I don't know whether that's because we have grown wiser and have pulled back from the brink of nuclear destruction, or that we have instead grown more cynical, recognizing that there's no way to hide or survive such an attack. Or maybe, just maybe, it's because we've become more honest and don't want to lie to our children by telling them they can survive a fiery holocaust by the fairy-tale charm of tucking their heads between their knees.

What started me thinking back to this inane ritual of

childhood was the recent Science Forum that I conducted on the subject of the end of the world with scientist-SF writers Arlan Andrews and Charles Sheffield. (You'll find it transcribed later on in this issue.) But surprisingly, as we discussed the ways the world might end, it turned out that each of the participants had at some time experienced the fear that he'd been caught in a nuclear crossfire.

I can remember my such time; it was one of the most terrifying moments of my life. In the middle of the night, I jumped up abruptly from a dream. Looking through the bare branches of the trees, I could see a blazing light that seemed to grow brighter as I watched. That glow, combined with my disoriented state, made me feel I was witnessing a distant mushroom cloud.

"They did it!" I shouted, waking my wife. "The stupid fools really went and did it!"

Irene found me crying hysterically. I hugged her tightly, telling her that I loved her, that we would all soon be dead. She soothed me and pointed out that the distant light was only a streetlight suddenly peeking through the trees, the leaves having newly fallen. I saw that she was right, but it took many moments before I was able to calm myself and let my head tell my heart the truth—that the world had not yet come to an end.

Deep inside of me, in a place I'd prefer to forget, has been living a belief that I would not survive to old age, that the United States of America and the Soviet Union would grind against each other until they burst into flame, and that I would be burned along with them. I am a member of a generation for many of whom a nuclear inferno was a certainty. It was impossible to keep that belief in the forefront of one's mind on a daily basis; a person would go mad. But late that one night, staggered by sleep, my true feelings slipped out from the back of my brain—that the human race would die by its own hand.

I feel much better now. I think most of the human race feels much better now. When the Soviet Union fell, we all gave a sigh of relief. But what does expecting the end of human life in one's own lifetime do to a person? What does it do to a generation?

One unfortunate side effect I see in society is that many people have developed a mistrust of science. For some reason, I have never quite felt that way. Perhaps I was inoculated by science fiction and have been able to see the good that the fruits of science have brought.

The end of the world will come when it will. The thing to remember is that it will not be science that dooms us. Quite the opposite: Science is the only thing that can save us.

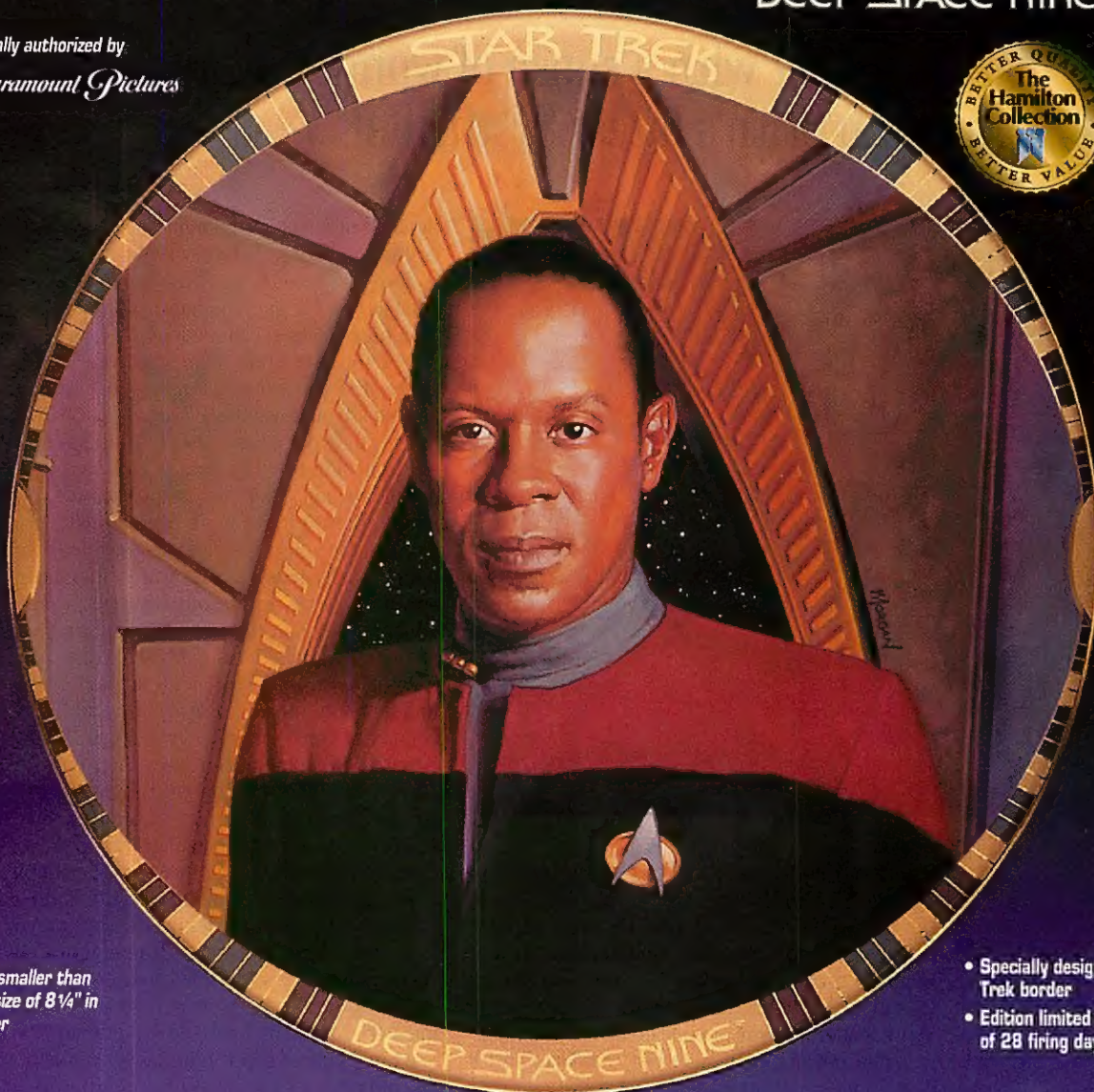
What threatens us is what has always threatened us. What threatened my childhood and my future was not science, but politics.

As Robert Frost wrote, "Some say the world will end in fire, and some say in ice." But I say that only the scientists can save us from the sorry end that the politicians rush to deliver. □

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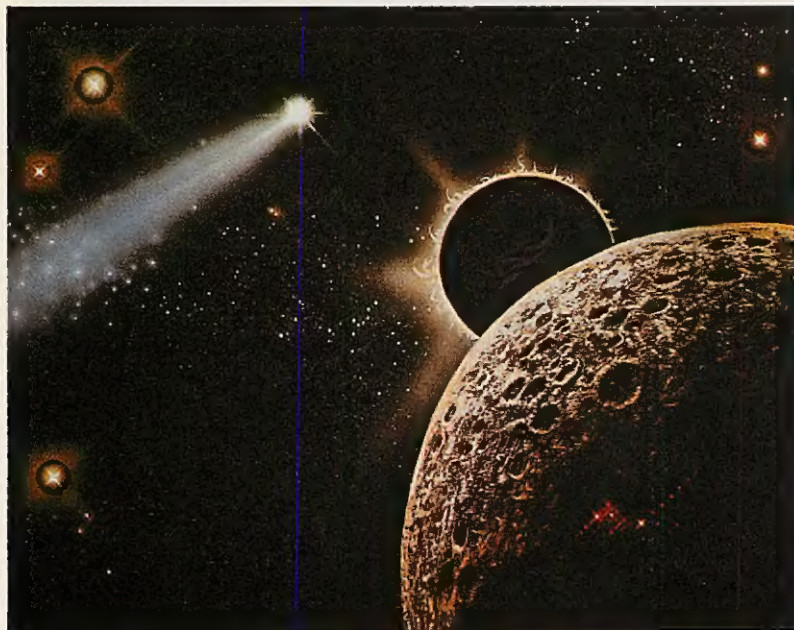
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BOOKS

By Paul Di Filippo

A *Reunion* with a sense of wonder awaits us in John Stith's latest SF thriller.



Reunion on Neverend transports you across the galaxies. Cover art by Kelly Freas.

IN HIS PREVIOUS WELL-RECEIVED NOVEL, *MANHATTAN Transfer* (1993), John E. Stith displayed many of the admirable talents shared by such hard-SF peers as Gregory Benford, Stephen Baxter and Greg Bear. He proved he could take a mind-stretching concept and push it to its uttermost limits, all the while making the reader feel that anyone could easily encompass each new development and twist, thanks to Stith's clear descriptive prose and keen visual sense.

The seed notion in *Transfer* was the literal abduction of the entire island of Manhattan by technologically advanced aliens. The fact that the entire heist was thrillingly concluded in the first 27 pages of a 381-page book should serve to illustrate Stith's whirlwind pacing and determination to pile wonder upon wonder. His conception of the kidnappers' ship's vast cargo hold bearing dozens of bubbled cities was a stroke of genius for providing a host of contiguous alien environments that could be easily visited. And Stith's characters had sufficiently sturdy shoulders to carry forward the story, although at times they seemed a trifle Irwin-Allenish, in the manner of the director responsible for populating his disaster films like *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) with a stock company of representative types.

Stith's new book is titled *Reunion on Neverend* (\$21.95, hardcover, Tor Books, 352 pages). Despite its jacket blurb, about which I'll say a little bit more towards the end of this review, it in no wise resembles *Transfer*. Instead, Stith harks back to an earlier novel of his, *Memory Blank* (1986), which was an SF-mystery hybrid, set on an orbital colony preparing to launch an interstellar generationship in the wake of Earth's murder. In that book, Stith demonstrated a certain flair for

the kind of novel Keith Laumer used to do so well, such as *The Day Before Forever* (1968): A man awakes in suspicious circumstances, with part of his memory wiped, and has to solve many enigmas, upon which much more than his personal fortune depends.

With this new book, Stith recaptures much of the suspense of *Memory Blank*. But his venue and tone this time around are plainly intended to echo those of Jack Vance.

Over the years, Vance has put his indelible stamp on a certain kind of tale that is rich in anthropological detail, strange societies and evocative place names; which feature loner male protagonists, strong-willed women, fey young girls and despicable sociopaths; and which easily shifts scene from one exotic planet to another. Rife with irony, drolleries and cynicism, Vance's books are instantly recognizable, each unique yet bearing a family resemblance to one another.

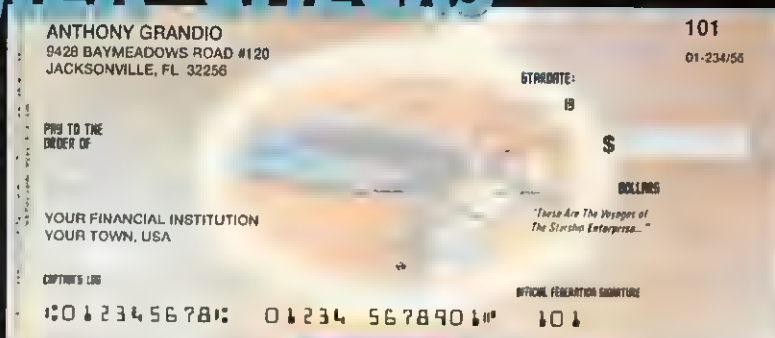
After *Reunion's* prologued hook of an inexplicable locked-room murder, Stith's book truly opens with a shipboard conversation between Lan Dillion and Parke Brenlek. Both men are returning from offworld for a 10th-year class reunion on the world of Neverend, whose inhospitable surface conceals a thriving human society of cavern-dwellers. Lan is soon revealed to the reader to be something other than the simple trader he is masquerading as, while the bluff Parke easily falls back into the role of sidekick he once played with Lan in school. When both enter the elaborately modified cave-system they once called home, they find themselves swept up in a mystery which seems to center on the museum owned by Lan's old sweetheart, Tessa Farlon.

As we might expect, Stith lavishes plenty of thought and attention to depicting the society indigenous to Neverend. While never quite approaching the depth and "thickness" of Vance's typical portrayal, Stith manages to convey the peculiarities associated with living perpetually underground. Modes of transport and housing, as well as a multi-dimensional means of orienting oneself, are all ingenious. Stith also has a definite touch with Vancean names: consider places called Alpinder, Kateron Cranny and Sarratonga, and personages named Miles Westerk, Wilby Hackert and Ellie Troughteral.

The latter two are the villains of the novel. Having discovered in Tessa's museum the entrance to an ancient, hitherto-unknown galaxy-spanning teleport system, they are determined to let nothing stand in their single-minded (yet clumsy) pursuit of wealth.

When this twist is introduced halfway through *Reunion*, one might expect Stith to open out the book's action into a hard-edged exploration of this potent SF trope, perhaps in the manner of C. J. Cherryh's *Morgaine* series. However, while there are some neat scenes in the "maze between worlds," the plot quickly cuts back to the chase and harassment of Wilby and Ellie, Lan having revealed himself to Tessa as a crack interstellar undercover cop. The latter portion of the novel, while intriguing in its depiction of a high-tech stakeout, is

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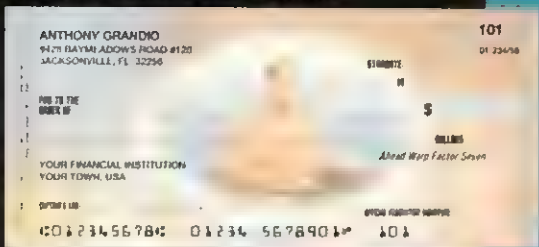


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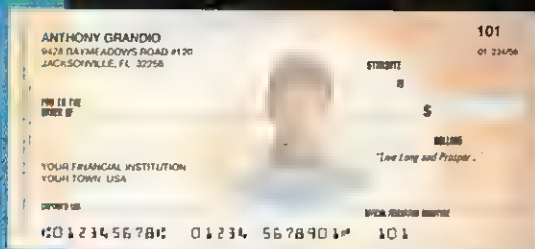


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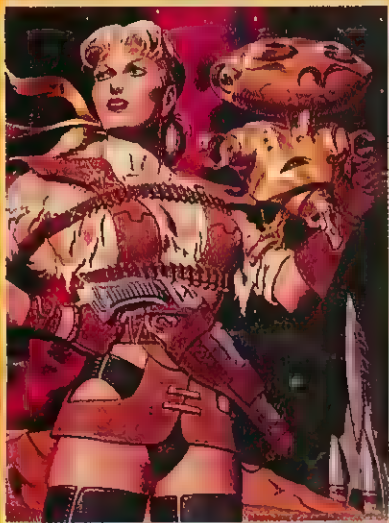
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rather static, especially since much of the action is watched over the shoulders, so to speak, of Lan and Tessa as they monitor the culprits over video screens.

This throwing-away of a potentially vital gimmick, while somewhat frustrating, is completely understandable in the context of the kind of book Stith has set out to write. As in a Vance novel, any kind of hi-tech transport between planets is never explored for its own sake, but serves only as a convenient means of relocating the characters to another fascinating venue. And in his portrait of the chasm-city of Sarratonga—a kind of obverse of Neverland—Stith fulfills that promise.

Throughout his career, Stith has shown an interest in depicting the realistic failure of love affairs and the troubles besetting male-female relations. In *Memory Blank*, it was the impending divorce of Cal Donley from his wife. In *Transfer*, it was the tentative romance between Matt Sheehan and Abby Tessa. In this book, Lan and Tessa must fumblingly sort through both old and new emotional quandaries before finally settling down together.

What Stith has accomplished in this book is the crafting of sprightly, fast-paced, humorous romance, if you will, a slightly old-fashioned but still rewarding tale. What he has *not* done—and plainly never intended to do—is to produce a book in the mode of *Manhattan Transfer*. *Reunion* is not hard SF by any stretch of the term. Consider for only one instance the lack of real bioengineering in this star-spanning commonwealth, where a leg crushed by a rockfall means a permanent limp. No, Stith is operating on a different plane from, say, Greg Bear in his *Eon* (1985) and *Eternity* (1988) duet, and it's false of Tor to imply otherwise in its dust-jacket text.

I don't believe any outright attempt to deceive is at work here. What I do think is happening are two things. First, an obvious desire to trade on the "hot" nature of hard SF and hook Stith's earlier readers. And, second a kind of phenomenon similar to "grade inflation." Because so much of SF these days is indistinguishable from fantasy, any book which uses any of the classic tropes is instantly deemed "hard." This is a pernicious trend, leading to total debasement of the "hard SF" label, and should be guarded against.

And a writer of Stith's obvious talents needs no such misleading boosterism.

Furious Gulf, by Gregory Benford, Bantam Books, Ju' 1994, 304 pages, \$22.95.

Among the dozen or so major science fiction authors who continue to have active scientific careers, Gregory Benford stands out as the most successful in merging rigorous, sense-of-wonder-filled hard-science settings and narratives with traditional literary values. Over the past two decades Benford has become one of the handful of authors whose novels serve as benchmarks in assessing the state of the art of the hard science fiction

that forms the core of the SF literary genre.

Benford's latest novel *Furious Gulf* makes a solid contribution to the hard science fiction form. It continues the narrative begun in *Great Sky River* (1987) and *Tides of Light* (1989), and is therefore the third novel in the "Galactic Center" series, set tens of thousands of years in our future at a time after humanity (and other organic life forms) have explored the galaxy but have been pushed back into a tenuous existence by a vast network of mechanical alien life forms.

Benford also wrote two novels set in this same future history earlier in his career. *In the Ocean of Night* (1977) was set in the late 20th century and involved mankind's first discovery of an alien artifact. The novel introduced Nigel Walmsley, who would become one of Benford's most memorable characters. *Across the Ocean of Stars* (1984) was a sequel set in the mid-21st century, which had Walmsley leading the first human interstellar mission to meet with an alien civilization. It is in the exciting conclusion to this novel that mankind discovers the existence of dangerous alien "mech" life forms, which threaten all other life in the galaxy. (One can't help noticing that all of the novels in this series have titles that relate to water and present an obvious metaphorical comparison between human civilization's development on Earth and its spread through the galaxy; such careful attention to metaphor and theme is one of the hallmarks of Benford's fiction.)

Furious Gulf cannot be read or reviewed as a stand-alone novel but can only be viewed within the context of the entire series of novels of which it is a part. In Benford's future history, mankind has spread throughout the central sectors of our galaxy and, despite some resistance from mechs, created a grand civilization existing primarily in gigantic space cities called "chandeliers." But as mankind grew, the mechs began to see them (and other organic life) as threats to their alien purpose, and began a struggle that results in mankind being forced out of space back to planets, and eventually out of the large "arcologies" into smaller "citadels" as the mechs became interested in using the resources of planetary surfaces.

The narrative that *Furious Gulf* continues begins in *Great Sky River*, which introduces us to a small band of humans, the family Bishop, who are struggling to survive on the planet Snowglade in the years following the destruction by the mechs of their citadel. They represent mankind reduced to its lowest status, the role of scavenging pests. They themselves are augmented by various mechanical devices, including exoskeletons providing endurance and strength, neural implants that provide widened senses, and interactive memory chips that provide them with the memories, knowledge and skills of selected ancestors. The viewpoint character is Killeen, leader of the Bishops since his

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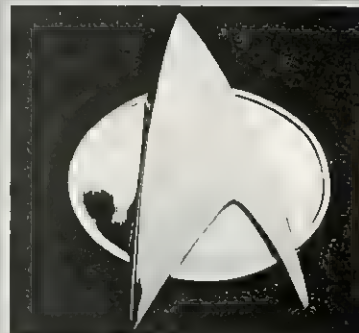
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father, Abraham, is missing and presumed dead after the destruction of their citadel. Benford also introduces in this novel a mech called "Mantis," which is the most intelligent and dangerous predator among the myriad mech forms. The first novel ends with the discovery of the *Argus*, a huge human-built starship from the chandelier age, which the Family Bishop uses to escape the planet, taking as many of the other human families as they can with them.

Tides of Light continues the story, with Killeen leading his band of several hundred humans to a new planet, where they discover a race of cyborgs (part organic and part machine), which are completing their destruction of the local mech life forms and preparing to cut up the planet to make a web to harness the energy of the star as a step toward fulfilling their perceived destiny to join with beings from other galaxies. Their primary tool is a gigantic circular cosmic string. In one of the more memorable sections of this novel, Killeen survives falling through the core of the planet while it is being cut up by the cyborgs. This book also introduces a vast magnetic-mind being who speaks to the humans. The novel ends with Killeen forming an alliance with the cyborgs and leaving the area pursued by mech ships, with their befriended cyborg Quath aboard *Argus*, and followed by the cyborg ships bringing along the cosmic string.

Furious Gulf continues the story, as the *Argus* leads a chase toward the true center of the galaxy. The magnetic mind, Killeen's hunch, and ancient human legends indicate that something important is at true center. The viewpoint character changes in this novel to Toby, Killeen's son, who is the closest to Quath, the cyborg traveling with them (and living on the *outside* of the *Argus*).

The center of the galaxy is an amazing place, with stars thousands of times as densely spaced as in Earth's far arm of the galaxy, but obscured by expansive clouds of dust and gases. And at true center is a massive black hole, which has devoured millions of suns during the billions of years since the galaxy was formed. The interstellar dust and gas clouds are populated by huge alien creatures. On their journey, the humans stop to go hunting (a common Benford motif) and harvest organic fluids from one such gigantic, space-faring, snakelike animal. When they reach the vicinity of true center, a sun is being consumed by the black hole, causing massive storms and space-time disturbances. There are more messages to Killeen and Toby from the magnetic mind, near mutinies among the human crew, and consultations with the cyborgs through Quath. With the help of the cyborgs and their cosmic string, the humans hold off the attacking mech ships and plunge toward the hole down an outflux of cooling matter. The cyborgs throw the cosmic circle ahead of the *Argus*, and the ship plunges into the turbulently warped space-time, escaping the

mechs and seeking a fabled human domain.

It has often been noted that technology far enough removed from our own is indistinguishable from magic. Benford has gone to great pains to make the physics of his creation consistent with current cosmological theories. And Benford's protagonists, who are actually not much more scientifically sophisticated than we are, are perfectly situated to provide for us an identifiable viewpoint to experience these wonders. Still, one can't help noticing how many aspects of Benford's tale (portentous omens, seeding lost knowledge, unfathomable godlike creatures that nevertheless talk to humans) are essentially identical to the standard motifs of high fantasy.

Although it's quintessential hard SF, *Furious Gulf* does have some annoying flaws. The humans often seem a little too similar to people today and far too often use 20th-century phrases that are jarringly anachronistic. Benford also has a better feel for cosmological physics than the biochemical sciences. The *Argus* has transparent agricultural domes where plants are grown in soil for food, for instance, a SF cliché that doesn't make much sense for a near-future short-run interplanetary ship, nevermind a high-tech interstellar vessel. The final sections where Toby is fleeing the Mantis and its minions sometimes border on incoherency. The most disappointing aspect of the book, however, is that it ends abruptly, with no real denouement. I believe that the book is actually the first half of a very long novel and, therefore, half of the third book of a trilogy.

Despite these cavils, *Furious Gulf* does make a solid contribution to Benford's "Galactic Center" series, which promises to be one of the great classics of the far-future, hard science fiction genre. There is every indication that the final book in the series, to be published in 1995, will be awe-inspiring, and maybe even profound.

D. Douglas Fratz

Temporary Agency, by Rachel Pollack, St. Martin's Press, 202 pages, \$18.95.

It's been a relatively short haul, temporally and artistically speaking, from the Industrial Revolution to the virtual one, but I for one am exhausted. And so, it seems, is literature; at least that literature that has professed to reflect all of the Enormous Changes at the Last Minute we've seen in the last hundred years or so. Time was when science fiction could, and would, predict technological and cultural innovation. Now it's all it can do to keep up. William Gibson seemed to be the last true SF innovator, having the gift and the good fortune to fall into cyberspace 10 years ago. Although *Neuromancer* too had its literary antecedents: namely, Ted Mooney's tragic and tragically underrated *Easy Travel To Other Planets* (which introduced the notion of information sickness, an imaginary disease which has overwhelmed at least one real-time novelist and critic), K.W. Jeter's *Dr.*

Adder, and Jack Dann's *The Man Who Melted*.

But recently I had the good fortune to have a new book fall into my lap: *Temporary Agency*, by Rachel Pollack, a writer whose work I've admired in the sadly defunct Vertigo comic series *Doom Patrol*, but whose novels have so far escaped me. Well, *mea culpa*—*Temporary Agency* is that wonderful thing, a novel truly startling in its approach to the ancient problem of presenting something new to readers for whom the fantastic has become the familiar. I should note here that *Temporary Agency* is set in the same world as Pollack's last book, *Unquenchable Fire*, which recently won the U.K.'s Arthur C. Clarke Award.

One of the longer-standing clichés of fantasy and science fantasy is *The World in Which Magic Really Works*.

In TWIWMRW, magic generally comes in two types: medieval/renaissance Magick (alchemists, wizards, demons, sorceresses; occasionally updated in Donna Karan drag), and your more contemporary boutique magic, or Magique, distinguished by its earnest practitioners (lonely young Bennington students carrying *The White Goddess*, lonely young computer hackers seeking to meet same who inadvertently loose incubi into the Transit Authority mainframe; lonely young punkish folksingers who know the secret verses of *Lord Randall My Son*) and its (usually) urban setting. I have to admit that I would be hard-pressed to come up with an alternative to these hoary yet serviceable prototypes.

Rachel Pollack has done it. In *Temporary Agency*, magic works—for good or bad—the way magic really would work in a world that mirrors present-day America. That is seldom to the advantage of the average person (and often to their detriment), and usually to the advancement of politicians. Pollack's magic is as powerful and brightly-colored as that map of the United States that used to hang in classrooms. To its practitioners, it is just as commonplace and just as remarkable as democracy itself. And, like democracy in late-century America, it is often ordered by fools.

Pollack's novel consists of two parts—they almost stand alone as novellas or novelettes. Part One, *Temporary Agency*, introduces us to 14-year-old Ellen Pierson, as engaging and realistic an adolescent as I've encountered recently (the ones I meet in real life you wouldn't believe). Ellen has a crush on Alison Birkett, a lawyer who specializes in demonic possession, but the girl's faith in Alison is shaken when the older woman is called in to protect Ellen's family from the baleful attention of a woman named Lisa Blackwell, who is having an obsessive affair with Ellen's 24-year-old cousin Paul.

It seems that Lisa Blackwell is actually Lisa Black Dust 7, a Malignant One or demon—succubus, actually, since her gifts really come to the fore during fore-, and after-play. Black Dust 7 runs an illicit tem-

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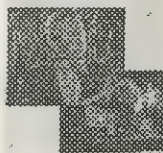
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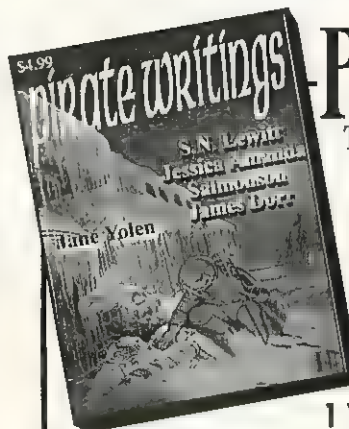
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porary agency whose government contracts would make even McDonnell Douglas look good. That's because Rachel Pollack's *America* is a place where all the various magics of the New Age have come to life—with a vengeance. There are good and evil guardian spirits, the Malignant Ones and Devoted Ones, whose titles reflect the ancient Greek and Celtic means of averting the attentions of the spirit world. To keep the Ferocious Ones at bay, there are innumerable government bureaucracies, such as the SDA (the Spiritual Development Agency), which monitor goings-on between our world and the Living World with all the sleazy finesse and high-tech trappings employed by the Kremlin and CIA combined. Fortunately, there are people like Alison Birkett, who made her reputation after a "peace group came to her with their suspicions of 'preternatural harassment'" and who found evidence of the Pentagon's illegal use of demons. Unfortunately, Birkett's breaking of the Pentagon scandal doesn't mean the end of government corruption. There are certain eternal verities that even magic can't alter.

Part Two takes place a decade later, when Ellen Pierson and Alison Birkett are thrown

together again, this time as lovers as well as demonbreakers. Once more the plot spins on government corruption, but the plot (though clever) isn't the greatest pleasure of *Temporary Agency*. This is one of those rare novels in which a world is so strange and breathtakingly original, and so utterly convincing, that you can really lose yourself in it. And getting lost is half the fun. This is a place where a rising politico has Benign assistants named Albert Comfort the Children 6 and Jeanette Benevolent Fire 3, and where Dorothy Parker's maxim that men never make passes at girls who wear glasses is noted as "proposition 23 from Adrienne Birth-of-Beauty's Shout from the Skyscraper."

Pollack's prose style is droll, deadpan without losing its narrative edge. Her politicians have publicists, polltakers, and sacred performance artists. Individuals consulting psychics cite Supreme Court rulings such as *Harrison vs. Truesource Center of Revelations* ("It violates privacy for a Speaker to give unsolicited predictions."). Timmerman, the consumer activist turned politician,

had begun his career with a highly publicized attack on Sacred Motors, charging that the hood totem for their

Nightleopard car failed to establish soul configurations for safe journeys. In fact, Timmerman demonstrated, the supposed guardian did nothing at all and might as well not have been there....

Clever as all this is, *Temporary Agency* avoids being mere satire through the energy of its narrative and its offbeat but engaging characters. It takes a few sly pokes at lesbian fiction in its loving descriptions of clothing and coffee bars, as well as those legions of New Age types—

As a government agency, the SDA displays portraits of the president in all their offices. You know the kind—an official government photo of our nation's leader smiling blankly in his official bird costume and sacred headdress, with painted-in guardian spirits hovering in the background, like Secret Service agents.

Temporary Agency is subtle, funny, and smart. The real magic here lies in Rachel Pollack: not only has she given life to fantasy's poor dead corpse, she's taught it a few jokes and made it dance. I hope she takes it all the way to the prom, or at least the Nebula and Hugo Awards.

Elizabeth Hand

BOOKS TO WATCH FOR

Time: The Semi-Final Frontier, by Lionel Fenn (Ace). The gunman they call Diego suddenly finds himself spirited from his 1880 Santa Fe home to the starship *Angus*, which boldly goes where readers love to roam—through the lunatic recesses of Fenn's manic mind.

Arthur War Lord #2: Far Beyond the Wave, by Dafydd ab Hugh (AvoNova). Having journeyed back 1500 years from the 20th century in search of a bloodthirsty fanatic in the first volume, SAS Officer Peter Smythe must prevent the world from splintering about him.

Sixth Column, by Robert A. Heinlein (Baen). Invaders threaten the United States, and the future's only hope is a ragged resistance force which has disguised itself as a religion, armed with superscientific devices. There's no time like the present to rediscover a classic.

Death Dream, by Ben Bova (Bantam Spectra). The award-winning writer-editor will hopefully follow Michael Crichton up the bestseller charts by trading in dinosaurs for a virtual reality theme park and putting his talents toward a timely near-future SF thriller.

Somewhere East of Life, by Brian Aldiss (Carroll & Graf). Burnell devotes himself to rescuing the threatened architectural treasures of our age, until his memories are stolen and must themselves be rescued. A black comedy by the Hugo and Nebula Award winner.

C. S. Lewis: A Biography, Revised Edition, by Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper (Harcourt Brace). His Narnia fables charmed us all, he devilishly chastised us with *The Screwtape Letters*, and his interplanetary romances made many of us fall in love with SF. Find out how this renaissance man was made.

Starquake/Dragon's Egg, by Robert L. Forward (Del Rey). Pay a visit to one of the cheela on that most alien of worlds, a neutron star with a surface gravity of 67,000,000,000 gees. You wouldn't want to live there, but it's a nice place to visit in this omnibus edition.

The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror, edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling (St. Martin's). Well worth your time, particularly as it contains Daniel Hood's marvelously playful "A Wealth of Kingdoms" from our pages last year. Read this to discover the best of the best.

The Stars Are Also Fire, by Poul Anderson (Tor). Last year, the author gave us back our long lost sense of wonder with *Harvest of Stars*. This year, he returns to the same universe to provide more details on the Lunarian civilization that captivated us all.

All I Really Need to Know I Learned By Watching Star Trek, by David Marinaccio (Crown). Forget about what you learned in kindergarten! This volume will tell you about the things that really matter, and you won't have to go on a five-year mission to figure them out.

Sword and Sorceress XI, edited by Marion Zimmer Bradley, DAW, 1994, 304 pages, paperback, \$4.99.

I was almost afraid to read this volume for fear that it would be too similar to the previous edition in the long-running series that I reviewed in the July 1993 issue of this magazine, but not to fear: Marion Zimmer Bradley has once again put together a distinctive and quite varied collection of stories.

Is there anyone out there who doesn't know Marion Zimmer Bradley's credits? Editor and anthologist, as well as one of the genre's grandmasters of fantasy writing, her Darkover series is well-loved, and her breakout Arthurian epic, *The Mists of Avalon*, is still going strong.

Her anthologies specialize in giving us classic fantasy stories in the heroic tradition, but primarily with female characters, in either magical or medieval fighting roles. As Bradley says in the introduction to Vicki Kirckhoff's story "Green-Eyed Monster," "The whole point of *Sword and Sorceress*, as in all fiction, is to show people behaving like people; far too many [authors] of the original male form of sword and sorcery fiction showed men behaving like automatons...." These stories, while staying firmly grounded in straightforward storytelling and fantasy-world building, usually involve people struggling to overcome flaws or learning lessons about themselves, and thereby growing.

In Jessie Faker's story "Bad Luck and Curses," the human failing is a lack of faith. Geyth is an unlucky witch who creates her own bad luck, because her negative life experiences haven't taught her to hope. Unable to believe in goodness, or even that

Continued on page 94

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MOVIES

By Dennis Fischer

Lawrence of Arabia meets *Star Wars* in *StarGate*.



Two cultures collide when Kurt Russell and James Spader cross through the StarGate.

IN FAIRY TALES, THE WORDS "ONCE UPON A TIME..." are the "open sesame" for entering a land of enchantment. For the moviegoer, the cue is a lowering of the lights as an eager audience waits to be transported into either a fantastic or familiar realm.

StarGate hopes to do both, taking its characters on a trip that is at once both fantastic and familiar. Set against the backdrop of the Great Pyramids of Giza, it tells of an incredible otherworldly artifact that has been discovered there. Daniel Jackson (played by James Spader of *Sex, Lies and Videotape* and *Wolf*), a brilliant Egyptologist, unlocks the secret of the *StarGate*, a device which can transport users to the far ends of the galaxy.

Colonel Jack O'Neil (Kurt Russell) has been assigned to lead a top-secret team through the gate to see something of the civilization that must have left it here. To ensure his men's return, he is forced to take along Jackson. On the other side the group discovers the culture that influenced Egypt 10,000 years ago and an enigmatic ruler, Ra (played by *The Crying Game*'s Jaye Davidson), who keeps most of the inhabitants of his world in slavery and deprived of technology.

Roland Emmerich, the German-born director-co-writer who has directed such science fiction films as *Universal Soldier* and *Moon 44*, got the idea for making the film after seeing a documentary about the Pyramids of Giza while in film school.

"At the time I started to write different outlines which I didn't like very much," Emmerich explained. "Then after about three or four years, I picked it up.... I wanted to have something which would connect with people today but would have something which would give you

Egyptian culture, and on the other hand, I didn't want to do time travel.

"So a friend of mine who is always doing conceptual art direction for me on my movies in Germany, who also works here now, I talked with him about this project. I asked him what [device] in science fiction literature is rarely used. He said to me, the transporter."

Transporters (also known as teleporters and matter transmitters) are a common device in science fiction and probably originated with Edward Page Mitchell's 1877 story "The Man Without a Body." They form a significant basis for several science fiction novels, including Poul Anderson's *The Enemy Stars*, where it's used to supply replacements for a spaceship; Algis Budrys' fascinating *Rogue Moon*, in which the moral dilemmas of matter transmission are explored as copies of a man face death on the Moon; Clifford Simak's Hugo Award-winning *Way Station*, which postulates a network of matter transmitters throughout the galaxy (and which is being used as the basis of a proposed science fiction series by Michael Cassutt); and Thomas Disch's *Echo 'Round His Bones*, in which transmission echoes create beings that are undetectable in the "real" world but which nevertheless exist.

However, *StarGate* simply uses its transporter as a spectacular device to send its main characters to an exotic locale. According to its writers, the story has been fashioned like an onion: As the mystery of each peel is solved, new layers and new mysteries are revealed, drawing the audience further into the story without the gratuitous "whammos" inserted into many of today's big-budget movies. (For the uninitiated, producer Joel Silver [*Hudson Hawk* and *Predator*] coined "whammo" from his mentor at AIP who suggested that audiences need a bit of extravagant action every reel, i.e. every 10 minutes, to keep them hooked on a story.) Emmerich's last film *Universal Soldier* cannily used that technique, but this time he wanted to try a different approach.

"I thought, what happens when in 1928, someone finds an object that they can't figure out," continues Emmerich, "and then 70 years later, they figure it out, but they can't make it work because there are some signs, some writing on it, which they can't decipher. Somebody comes in and deciphers it, and suddenly they realize they have a doorway into another kind of galaxy."

Emmerich got together with his writing partner, former actor and now *StarGate* co-writer/co-producer Dean Devlin, and cranked out a fast rough draft of the screenplay which was pitched around Hollywood. Devlin explains that he wanted to do *Lawrence of Arabia* on another planet.

"Since *Lawrence of Arabia* was Roland's favorite movie, we took the two concepts, his and mine, and we jammed them together," said Devlin. "We were talking to one of the conceptual artists, Holger Gross, about science fiction novels and films, and he said that in film, aside from the transporter in *Star Trek* and the pod in

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Egyptologist Daniel Jackson (James Spader), is confronted by Ra (Jaye Davidson), ruler of the strangely Egyptian alien world.

The Fly, transporters weren't used that often. They appear a lot more in science fiction literature. That's where we thought of the *StarGate* and linked the two ideas together, one world to the other. That was just five years ago, and we've been working on it ever since."

Once through the *StarGate*, the Earth team encounters a primitive culture highly reminiscent of ancient Egypt's. "The language has evolved, their culture has evolved differently, and they are devoted to a religion which is obviously like an Egyptian religion," said Emmerich, "but there are certain things they notice at the very beginning which are kind of odd. [The aliens] believe in the existence of a god who is really there....

"He is not really God, he is like the Wizard of Oz, who is a member of a higher alien civilization who has a big mining operation which has been going on for thousands and thousands of years because he uses the legend to suppress the people. Our people come in and confront these exploited people and [ask] them, 'what is this?'"

"First, they have to learn how to communicate, which is quite hard... The way it really works is [through] the signs the Spader character has to decipher [which] help him decipher all. He finds [the key] out through coincidence. They have to find something where it's written down, and if it is destroyed, they have no kind of way to find it. You can look at a certain drawing, and say, yes that's a dog. Even if you pronounce it wrong, you can still communicate.... Drawings are easy because everything in art or everything in writing is made with symbols. There is always the language barrier, but people can understand each other or they

like each other without words.

"While this alien culture is fairly stagnant, there have been changes over the ages. Moreover, ancient Egyptian is a dead language and there is no accurate guide to its pronunciation, which poses a major problem for Jackson, who needs to translate to bring the team back home to Earth."

While the Egyptian motif may be familiar, Emmerich emphasizes, "I didn't want to overdo the Egyptian influences because I didn't want to do some '50s epic like *The Ten Commandments*. I wanted to have an epic scale, which is something I wanted to bring back to the movies, and even though the movie is expensive, it's not as expensive as it may seem because we used a lot of digital technology, from the very simple to very complicated tricks to create images which have a very large scope.

"The basic thing that we did was to look at Egyptian art and examine how we could alter it, try to get some African influences in it.... We went to the roots of Egyptian culture, which is much cruder and much simpler, but we also went to a kind of modern Egyptian rendering of Asian-Egyptian art."

From the start, Emmerich wanted Kurt Russell to play the hard-nosed Colonel Jack O'Neil. "*Escape from New York* is one of my favorite films," he said. "I've always liked Kurt, and I think he's really good in this kind of part. He's ice cold. The advantage of Russell is he can be very cold and restrictive and do bad things, and yet you still know he [will] come around because he has this sympathetic personality about him. He's a guy you can trust."

Emmerich predicts that people will be surprised by James Spader's portrayal of the

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nerdy genius Egyptologist Daniel Jackson. "We wanted to have two or three actors ...nobody would ever imagine in a movie like that, and that influenced us to do it that way," said Emmerich. "It is pretty interesting to see an actor like James Spader in that [kind of a role]."

The biggest casting coup may be getting Academy Award nominee Jaye Davidson, who has been adamant in his refusal to take on roles with which he does not feel comfortable or challenged. Davidson considered many offers over a period of several months before deciding on *StarGate*.

The cast also includes John Dieh and Viveca Lindfors, and introduces Mili Avital, who won the 1991 Israeli Film Academy Award for her work in *Over the Sea*. Touts Devlin, "Mili was a wonderful discovery. I had personally interviewed over 2,000 people for her part. We had a major search to find a girl for the film. She had to be innocent, yet someone with strength who could become part of a movement on this other world, someone believable as an ancient Egyptian, someone who could act with her eyes because she never speaks any English, and we hadn't found the girl, and we'd already started shooting the picture.

"As a producer, I was pulling my hair out, but Roland said, 'Don't worry, she'll come, she'll come.' Then on Rosh Hashana, we met a girl born in Jerusalem who had one parent who was an Israeli and one who was an Egyptian, and I thought this woman was sent to us from God to be in the movie. We cast her, started shooting with her the next day, taught her the language quickly, which she was very good at because her native tongue made it easy for her to use the pronunciation."

According to Devlin, part of the impulse behind *StarGate* was to make a type of science fiction film that hasn't been seen in a long time. "It harkens back to the old Edgar Rice Burroughs-type science fiction, the *Princess of Mars*-type, even *Flash Gordon* in some sense," he said, "but without doing it tongue-in-cheek."

"Anytime someone does this now, they feel the need to wink at the audience and say, we're just kidding. We said, no. These things were written with love, let's make it a homage to that style of science fiction and bring it back, and bring it back in the most grand scale possible. Let's bring back the epic and tell the kind of science fiction story you don't see all the time. And I think that's what we've accomplished...."

"Do people want to see an adventure movie without major action stars? Our bet was, if you cast really great actors, that's better than a big marquee name. The three actors we got...delivered absolute home runs. These actors refused to allow a character to be two-dimensional, thus expanding what we were trying to accomplish in the film, and hopefully making these characters so compelling that you'll care about this adventure

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they've gone on."

Devlin believes that George Lucas proved that the best special effects in the world mean nothing without great characters. "There were a lot of films that tried to rip off the Spielberg, George Lucas films, but they never had the heart, they never had the character. That's what we wanted to focus on—bring in the best actors we can, create interesting characters that go on a magical journey, and hopefully it becomes compelling."

To create verisimilitude, the filmmakers went to a UCLA professor to develop a best-guess attempt at what ancient Egyptian might have sounded like, and then insisted that all the actors playing aliens learn to speak in it.

"It was also important to us that white men don't come there and rescue them," said Devlin, "and they don't. All they do is bring knowledge. The knowledge itself empowers the people and they take action for their own benefit. They make changes and they grow. They alter the way they are living and they alter their belief systems."

During the '70s, a certain charlatan created scientifically illiterate bestsellers by suggesting that aliens were the answer to ancient mysteries that have puzzled mankind. While the scientific community paid him scant attention, his theories caught the public imagination by creating a sense of wonder about the past. Echoes of his influence are felt in *StarGate*.

Nevertheless, Devlin believes that the science fiction audience is a sophisticated one. "A lot of issues we deal with in the film, we don't explain," he said. "We're assuming a level of intelligence from the audience, which we were told is dangerous, but I don't believe it. I believe that people are a lot hipper and wiser than studios give them credit for."

"We have images that show you what this movie is about, the discovery of who built the pyramids and why, but we never actually say that. We never bring back the theories of Von Däniken. We never bring back the idea, because that's somehow pedantic, that's somehow talking down to the audience. We don't want to do that. Those who understand that aspect of the film will get a kick out of it. Those who don't will enjoy it on another level."

Enmerich tries to convey the scope of the project. "We had a really huge set for the town, but digitally we made it [so that] people ask us where did we shoot it, [guessing] Morocco, Tunisia. It's so real, we really take advantage of what digital technology brings us. We have creature effects. We have some really big animals running around."

"We have these Egyptian gods which have this device...which collapses to nothing. It's not morphing, it's this mechanical effect done digitally. I turned to the digital department and said can you do it or can you not, and they said, yes, we can and they have been working like a year on some of these

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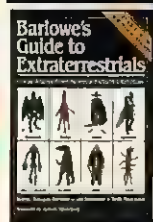
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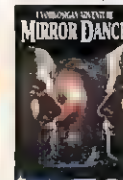
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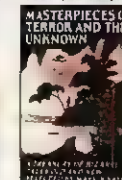
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shots. We keep wanting to take the stiffness out, you know?"

The filmmakers have attempted to combine the science fiction space opera with the style and scope of old-fashioned epic movies such as *The Guns of Navarone*, *Dr. Zhivago*, *Cleopatra*, and *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. "That was the kind of scope with thousands of extras and big buildings," said Emmerich, "and we tried to revive that but in a modern form and science fiction is not a bad medium to do that. You have an audience ready to buy into a concept and go with it."

The filmmakers are very proud of being able to pull the film off on-time and on-budget, coordinating scenes with thousands of extras. To make the film, they had to set up an entire city in the Yuma desert and supply the cast and crew with 60,000 gallons of water a day. They know that a movie has to be special to get an audience to see it in a theater, and so they put their efforts into creating a film that can only be fully appreciated on the big screen.

The Carolco/Le Studio Canal/Centropolis Film production, due to be released by MGM this November, spent \$50 million to give it its lavish look. *Raiders of the Lost Ark's* Kit West was the film's visual effects supervisor, with Patrick Tatopoulos (*Super Mario Brothers*, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*) doing the creature effects, based on Egyptian mythology. Jeffery A. Okun and the Kleiser-Walczak



Colonel Jack O'Neil (Kurt Russell) is the leader of a top-secret team that locates and then tries to activate the Stargate into an alien world.

Construction Company are doing the impressive digital effects.

Emmerich plans to take a break from making science fiction films, but Devlin has already had a screenplay, *Final Judgment*, optioned by Steve Tisch. *Final Judgment* has elements of *Judge Dredd*, Philip K. Dick's *Minority Report* and *Logan's Run* in it.

Emmerich and Devlin of Centropolis Film Productions have worked hard to get audiences to beam into theaters this Christmas season. Perhaps with the resources of noted executive producer Mario Kasar (*Total Recall*; *Terminator 2*), they will manage to resurrect the epic and bring scale and scope back to science fiction filmmaking. □

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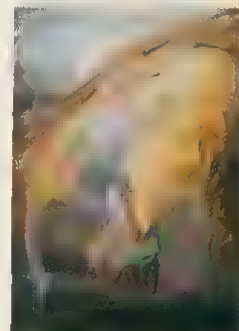
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PEOPLE HAVE WORRIED ABOUT THE END OF THE world as long as there have been people to do so. The closer we draw to the millennium, the more this issue heats up as a topic of conversation. Join with us as we talk to two SF writer-scientist-essayists as they explore the destruction of the planet and perhaps the entire universe from both scientific and theological perspectives.

Dr. Arlan Andrews, Sr. recently completed a tour of duty with the White House Science Office and currently works for a national laboratory in the Southwest. Over 50 of his short stories, articles and poems have appeared in all the major SF magazines. Charles Sheffield is the chief scientist for the Earth Satellite Corporation and holds a Ph.D. in theoretical physics. Since 1977, he has published over 100 scientific articles and 80 short stories.

SF AGE: How will the end of the world come?

ANDREWS: Not with a bang, but with a whisper. I think first you have to define what you mean: the end of the world for human beings, the physical end of the planet, the end of life as we know it, or the end of Western civilization. I think all of these can be brought about by some asteroid impact that could be happening even before this issue of the magazine comes out. And I predict when it happens there will be no warning, not even a radar warning. I think they didn't know about the one that passed between the Earth and the moon last year until it was on its way out of the system.

SHEFFIELD: My theory is part of the General Principle of Cussedness, which is that the thing you know about and worry about is not the thing that gets you.

And the thing that will get us is some phenomenon that we have not bothered to think about. We've thought about asteroids, we've thought about a contagious version of AIDS that will get everyone, but lurking out there somewhere is something we never bothered to think about that will be 100 percent effective in knocking off humans. I don't think this will happen, but if it were to happen, that's the way it would go on. I want to make a comment about the millennium. Millennium fever is based on a strange religious principle, which is that God counts in decimal. If God in fact counts in binary, then 2048 would be a much better year for the end of the world than 2000. However, if you happen to be Moslem, you date your calendar from the flight of Mohammed to Mecca, which was in 632 A.D. If you happen to be Jewish, you start your calendar in 5000 B.C. or something. So the millennium is a peculiarly Christian worry. But realistically, no one at this table thinks that religion has anything to do with the actual end of civilization or humans.

ANDREWS: I couldn't call myself a devil's advocate if I took the other position. I grew up in the fundamentalist Baptist church, so I probably have a different background. And as a child, when I started reading about what happened at the other millennium, I found out that when the year 999 rolled around, there was no excitement. Nothing happened around the year 1000. I think this millennial madness has been created in *this* millennium, in the last 100 years.

SHEFFIELD: So you say that nobody worried in 999?

ANDREWS: That's what I read. When I was in the fundamentalist phase as a teenager, nobody cared, so I didn't know why we should worry about 2,000. For true believing fundamentalist Christians today, the concept that the year 2000 should mean anything or the end of the world would be blasphemy. Christ said that it would come like a thief in the night, and no one knows but the Father when this would occur. So if you're expecting it, it's not going to happen. It's Zen in the ultimate here.

SHEFFIELD: I'm much more interested, actually, in the end of humans than I am interested in the end of the world. Because I'm an optimist, and I believe that there's a very good chance that humanity will survive longer than Earth will survive. We already know that Earth has had it. In another few billion years, the sun will become a red giant, it will expand to 100 times its present size and 2,000 times its brightness, and the Earth will shrivel up. But if humans are smart, we'll be long gone. We'll be doing other things in other places. Five billion years is a long time. It's the age of the Earth roughly, but it's not a long time in terms of the probable future age of the universe. Even if it ends, the best estimate is that we have between 50 and 100 billion years before we return to a Big Crunch. So in a small fraction of that time, Earth will disappear, but humans will have lots more time in which to play games.

SF AGE: What are the likeliest possible scenarios for the end of the world, short of the death of the sun?

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ANDREWS: You've already taken asteroids away from me. If you read Walter Jon Williams' story last year, the book *Aristoi*, he hypothesized nanotechnology devices that ate up the entire Earth, so that the people who were off the Earth had to build another Earth someplace else. Likewise, the end of the human race can be brought about by new viruses, viruses that are created as weapons, or microtechnology, microrobots, that sort of thing gone mad, which is the basis of many stories already. Editors like yourself won't even buy stories like that anymore.

SHEFFIELD: When we talk about the end of humans, we don't necessarily mean that that's bad. In other words, the optimist viewpoint is that humans—perhaps plus machines—will become a form which we can't define as human, but which is superior to what we are.

SF AGE: That's what Fred Pohl's "Day Million" was really about, our inability to really conceive and understand what the future really is, even if we really saw it. The future is as distant from us as we are to Cro-Magnon man.

SHEFFIELD: One of the most perplexing things about the future is that although by definition we can't change the past, we *can* change the future. Yet humans seem to spend a lot more time worrying about the past than they do about the future, unless it's a month or two away. Very few people worry about the longer-term future, probably because they consider they can't affect it. But in fact it's the only thing they can affect. They certainly can't affect the past. But the number of historians versus the number of futurists would make an interesting comparison.

ANDREWS: That's the function we try to fulfill as science fiction writers. A lot of this gets down to the end of the world. We each are going to, more than likely, experience a personal end to our own personal world at some time—

SF AGE: I'm not planning on it.

ANDREWS: Well, we're working on that. I've written about cryonics, and our friends in the Last Proton Society are planning to be around forever, and Charles has written about the creatures that survive between the universes and protect those people who survive.

SF AGE: Surveys are done from time to time in which people are asked whether they think there'll be an Earth in 100 years, whether they think there'll be a nuclear holocaust, and so forth. People seem to come out very pessimistic in those surveys. What do you think? Are we likely to destroy the planet before nature goes ahead and does the same?

ANDREWS: Not the planet. The ecosystem is going to adapt, even to all-out nuclear war. It's just that when the equations are balanced, the human race may not be part of the solution anymore.

SHEFFIELD: I'll tell you a story about this. James Lovelock, who is the author of the Gaia theory, was in Washington giving a talk in Gaithersburg, and we had to get down

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to the American Museum of Natural History on Constitution Avenue. So I took him there, and as we were driving along in the car, we started talking about nuclear war. And Lovelock said, "It would be completely unimportant." And I said, "But it could kill everyone on earth!" And he said, "I was speaking on the microbiological level."

That was really great. You can have an abstract attitude to this. So long as the bacteria were there, he felt that Gaia would still be in control.

ANDREWS: There was an article in *The New York Times* last year about the fact that some scientists now hypothesize that most of the life on Earth is

microbiological and most of it is underground, maybe as much as 10 or 12 miles deep, all over the Earth. There are giant rivers and currents and microbial life that exists at boiling-water temperatures way down under, so if anybody characterized life on Earth, if aliens had a total life scan as on *Star Trek* and looked down, they'd say, "OK, this is mostly micrological stuff, and there are a few anomalies of bipeds on the planet." Even the biological mass of insects is dwarfed by this probable microbiological Earth of subterranean life.

SHEFFIELD: If it's there.

ANDREWS: I like the idea. Because we could scour the top surface and make it molten, and these little guys would still perk along and eventually something intelligent might come out of it.

SHEFFIELD: As opposed to what we are now, you mean. Remember Gandhi's comment when somebody said, "What do you think of Western civilization?" He said he thought it would be a good idea. Applying that to intelligent life on Earth, it would be good to have an intelligent life form on Earth. We have not done a good job so far. But we're young. We're kids, in terms of organisms. When we've been around as long as the turtles, if we've still got nothing, then we should be ashamed of ourselves.

SF AGE: Let's get back to something we were talking about before, not just the death of the planet, but the death of the universe. Both of you seem to have been optimistic that by the time the planet goes, the human race will have figured out how to have survived its passing—

SHEFFIELD: But it won't be the human race.

SF AGE:—or whatever we've evolved into. But how do you escape the true end, the heat death of the universe? What method would there be to survive the end of it all?

SHEFFIELD: Let me give you an answer that is not mine. It's an answer provided by Freeman Dyson, who in an article published in 1979 looked at the very, very far future. He concluded that even in that future, with

the heat death proceeding, there is still time enough to think an infinite number of thoughts and, therefore, in some sense, life is infinite, life goes on infinitely.

SF AGE: Sort of the Zeno's paradox of survival.

ANDREWS: That's a good way of saying it. Another way is maybe human beings in a few billion years or even less will have discovered how to displace themselves in time. And you can work yourself back into time and do it all over again.

SF AGE: Most people can easily comprehend how you can escape from Earth. You just get into a spaceship and go on to

another planet. But the universe seems to be something outside of which you cannot step.

ANDREWS: Well, there might be parallel universes that were all created at the big bang.

SF AGE: So we all just go to the universe next door?

SHEFFIELD: The bad universe, or the bad situation, is one in which you simply go back and relive everything you did before. The wholly symmetric case in which you do go back in time, but then do precisely what you did last time around, is most unappetizing.

ANDREWS: That would be hell. An infinite loop.

SHEFFIELD: Who wants that? What you really want is the option of going to a clean, new, unspoiled universe and starting from scratch. But the danger of that is you almost have to reject your memories, or else it *won't* be a clean, unspoiled universe.

ANDREWS: Well, we've gone far astray from the original ending of the planet. We've left out alien intergalactic warfare.

SF AGE: We've gone from the universal to the personal.

SHEFFIELD: We've been talking about personal mortality.

ANDREWS: Well, that's all that really counts.

SHEFFIELD: Part of the reason may be that I think that the chance of aliens coming here to kill us off is as close to zero as you can get. That is not, I think, our likely end. It's a *possible* end, but why should they?

ANDREWS: I don't know. Cussedness?

SF AGE: So we've gone to the personal because when we die, the world ends.

ANDREWS: In my case, the world began in 1940 or slightly after that, when I started having memories about it.

SHEFFIELD: I have very little faith in the idea of aliens coming to see us, because it's much easier for us to develop the power to go the stars and spread out to the rest of the galaxy than it is for someone else to arise independently of us as intelligent organisms. Odds against intelligence are very, very high. I think that we're a fluke with a very low probability. I claim that the most likely end

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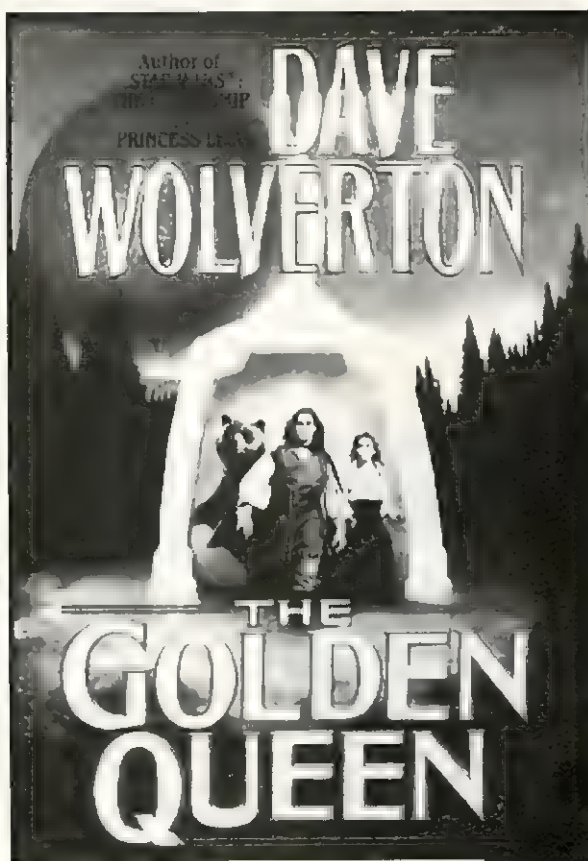
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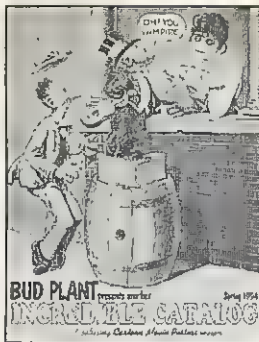
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of the world will be a natural end. Or humans will move.

SF AGE: Let's go in terms of descending order of probabilities.

SHEFFIELD: Getting rid of the planet? Or getting rid of people? If we want to get rid of the biosphere, with some difficulty we might be able to initiate a change to the natural homeostatic balance of the Earth, so it runs off to look like Venus. People like Carl Sagan have worried about that. People like Lovelock have said that it is really difficult to do. The pressure to return to a rough balance is very, very large, so we'd probably find it very hard to wipe out the biosphere. And I think it will be difficult to do anything more than annoy the Earth locally. As Lovelock said, if we released every weapon in our nuclear arsenal, it couldn't do a thing on the microbiological level. It might kill us off, that's all.

ANDREWS: It wouldn't bother roaches and ants.

SHEFFIELD: The sun is not going to go nova, according to present theories, believe those if you like—it's not the right stellar type to go nova. There's nothing near enough, we believe, to go supernova and wipe us out. If one of the components of Alpha Centauri went supernova, it might severely damage us, but again, it wouldn't kill everything off on the Earth. You need the sun to go supernova or nova to do that.

ANDREWS: And the historical tie-in that seems likely is these giant asteroids or meteor impacts have been things that have readjusted the ecological balance of the Earth, like dinosaurs in the Mesozoic. The two or three big events that have wiped out life.

SHEFFIELD: There's the Cretaceous extinction. There was another one called the Permian extinction, which was a good deal worse. But a Halley's Comet-sized object hitting the Earth only happens once every few billion years. And if we've got a billion years before we have to worry, we should be able to do a lot. We should be off Earth doing other things by then. Volcanoes don't seem to have the clout to do us in, nor earthquakes. We've already survived huge earthquakes.

ANDREWS: What were the great ways for ending the world in science fiction in the old days? We in SF were always best at it.

SHEFFIELD: The mysterious cloud through which the Earth moves and all life forms die out.

ANDREWS: And then H. G. Wells had the one about the cloud passing, too. Everybody gave up all their capitalist ideas and became socialist and the world was great.

SHEFFIELD: I don't remember that one. There was a Conan Doyle story called "The Poison Belt," in which the Earth goes through

this region of space, and everyone drops down, and the birds stop singing. Anyway, it turns out that they were just asleep. But you cannot enter a region of space in which the ambient gases are poisonous and can kill us off—space is too much a vacuum for that.

SF AGE: Then there's *When Worlds Collide*.

ANDREWS: That was great. Good movie.

If we've got a billion years...we should be able to do a lot. We should be off Earth doing other things by then.

SHEFFIELD: You've got to worry about the fact that the story violates everything that we know about linear and angular momentum for it to happen. A really big asteroid, say one that's 200 to 300 miles across, could wipe out almost everything, but there aren't any of those available in the right orbits. The biggest of the asteroids, which is Ceres, has a diameter of about 750

kilometers. It's big enough, but it's in a stable orbit in the asteroid belt.

ANDREWS: Say there's something out there like Nemesis, this dark star they've talked about that might be out there that occasionally every 40,000,000 years would bring a swarm of comets in and smash into the Earth. Comets can hit other planets. We've seen in the last 10 years comets hit the sun—they've photographed that. Next July the comet Shoemaker-Levy is going to hit Jupiter. (Our virtual reality lab will even let you ride the comet into Jupiter!)

SHEFFIELD: It's very hard to think of easy ways to knock the Earth out of existence. Everything you can think of, when you look at the probabilities, you decide it is very, very unlikely.

ANDREWS: I'd have to argue with that. As you said before, we've only been around a fraction of the time the planet has. And so we don't know what the odds are. There could be one barreling in right now that we won't even know about until it hits or passes.

SHEFFIELD: Sure. The problem with statistics is that they are statistics.

ANDREWS: But we're not even in the same physical space that that's been because the entire solar system is rotating in the galaxy, and the galaxy is moving.

SHEFFIELD: That's true. But the bits of rock that we worry about are not interstellar, they're gravitationally bound to the sun and must stay in orbit until they're perturbed by something else, like another big piece of rock, to come and hit us. We don't get much interstellar garbage falling on the Earth. It's mostly our own solar system that's coming in to visit us. As you can see, I'm a great optimist. I can think of very few ways to destroy the Earth, and still fewer to destroy the universe. And Earth is really an insignificant element in our long-term future. We have only 100 billion stars in the galaxy, and 100 billion

Continued on page 38

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ESSAY

By Frederik Pohl

A SF grandmaster explains how good ideas build better stories.



For Frederik Pohl, the question isn't, "where do you get your crazy ideas?"; it's "where don't you?" Art by Doug Chezem.

WHEN PEOPLE ASK ME WHERE I GET MY IDEAS, the most honest answer I can give them is "everywhere." It's the simple truth. In their raw form, at least, the ideas come from places I've visited, people I've met, things I've read, conclusions I've come to—they come out of the totality of my existence, just as they have done for every writer who ever lived. And when something strikes me as possibly useful later on, I jot it down in my notebook. (Well, actually, in my computer file; these days the little spiral-bound pad I used to carry around is long gone.) Then I mine the notebook for story ideas.

Sometimes they actually do work out, especially when a couple of them seem somehow synergistic. A note on a cattle epidemic in England called "mad cow disease" (you may wonder how you tell when a cow has gone mad, but nevermind that now), plus another on what it might be like to live on a planet that has a highly elongated elliptical orbit around its sun, did seem to fit together. Together they added up to the foundation for my short novel *Stopping at Slowyear*, which wound up as a Hugo nominee last year. (Only as a bridesmaid, though; in the final vote it placed no better than second.) In the same way, I had some notes on the exciting new developments that are coming along in the fields of photovoltaics and high-temperature superconductors. Together they would make it possible to build a billion-megawatt solar power plant on the Moon. What could

that Titanic flood of dirt-cheap electrical energy be used for? Why, to manufacture some high-value, low-mass commodity like antimatter...and so the Lunar Antimatter Factory became the opening setting for my forthcoming Tor novel, *The Voice of Heaven*.

My notebook doesn't deal only with science tidbits; it includes all sorts of odds and ends. The bad part is that for every note that ultimately makes it into a story, there are several dozen that don't. I hate to let them go to waste, though. So herewith, presented for your entertainment, a more or less random assortment of items from my notebook that I haven't found a story handle for...at least so far.

Famous last words. On her deathbed, Gertrude Stein muttered, "What is the answer?" Then she thought it over and a moment later, just before dying, she added, "What is the question?"

Syphilis. Apparently the disease originated in the New World; there are no confirmed European cases before Columbus. In America, human skeletons as old as 4,000 years BP (Before Present) show traces, but the very oldest identified case of syphilis, from what is now the State of Indiana, goes back 11,000 years and the skeleton involved is not that of a human being. It belonged to a bear. (One theory of the origin of AIDS suggests that it came from African green monkeys, transmitted to some bizarrely inclined humans when they employed the monkeys for sex. Well, maybe so; but what do you suppose those early Americans got up to with bears?)

Alien onomatopoeia. In English we write the sound of water pouring from a jug as glub-glub, but Koreans write it as kwal-kwal, French as gloup-gloup, Spanish as tot-tot and Arabs as gloog-gloog.

Lucky Einstein. In 1914 a team of German astronomers planned to travel to observe an eclipse, checking Einstein's relativity predictions, but World War I forced them to call it off. That was a good thing for Albert Einstein. Shortly thereafter he discovered that his preliminary calculations were wrong. By the time the war was over, he recalculated and got them right, and the eclipse observations made then supported his theory.

What's in a name. The sex attractant secreted by the male cockroach has been named "seducin."

Fast centrifuges. One way of separating U-235 from its less active isotopes is to whirl it in a centrifuge. These can't be painted; they spin so fast that the paint would fly off.

Cold Steel. Physicists doing very low-temperature research have a problem with the steel used to build their machines. If it has been exposed to the surface for any length of time, it picks up induced radioactivity—from cosmic radiation or from fallout from bomb tests and accidents like the one at Chernobyl—and so the radiation warms it, not much but enough to spoil their experiments. So the next generation of low-temperature physicists is considering raising one of the scuttled

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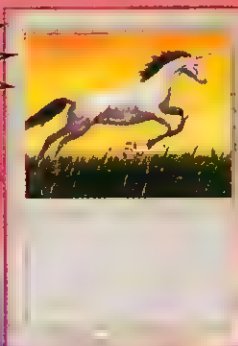
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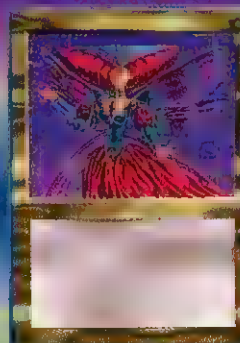


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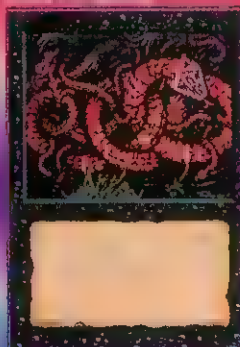
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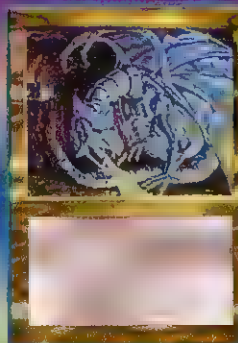
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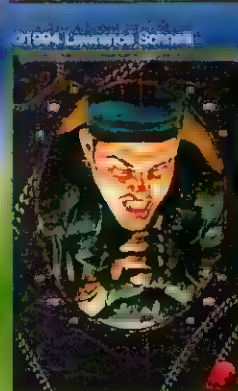
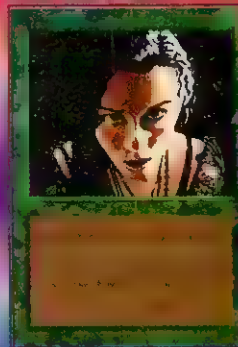
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World War I German battleships from the bottom of Scapa Flow so they can salvage some of that well-aged and presumably no longer radioactive steel.

Gender differences in dying. In a study of 3 million cases, it appeared that gravely ill men approaching a birthday generally died before it came, while women in similar condition tended to hang on 'til it was over.

Thomas Edison fixes a race. When New York State decided to use the electric chair for executing criminals, Edison (advocate of direct-current power) competed with Westinghouse (favoring alternating current) for the contract. Edison, however, had second thoughts. It occurred to him that whoever won would get bad publicity for producing "killer" power, so he threw the result to let Westinghouse win. (But, in the long run, AC prevailed anyway.)

Naming the second. When clocks got good enough to measure small parts of an hour reliably, the smaller unit, at one-sixtieth of an hour, was called the "minute." When clocks got better still, they needed to

invent a still smaller unit, which they called the "second minute."

James Joyce meditates on cosmology. In

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man Joyce says, "What was after the universe? Nothing. But was there anything around the universe to show where it stopped before nothing began? It could not be a wall but there could be a thin, thin line there around everything. It was very big to think about everything and everywhere.... It made him very tired to think that way."

Whatever happened to Hypatia? She was the last of the great Greek mathematicians, and one of the very few females; but she made one little mistake. She held to the classic be-

lief in the Greek pagan gods, which did her in when a mob of Christian zealots decided to destroy all the pagan temples in Alexandria. She tried to stop them, and they killed her.

How the Chinese invented the compass. Around the 6th century A.D., Chinese fortunetellers used a kind of spoon-shaped object balanced on a point; they spun it, and made predictions from where it stopped.

That worked fine as long as the spinners were ceramic. Then they began using iron-containing metal and were dismayed to discover that when the pointers stopped, they were always pointing to the same direction. (Navigators didn't begin using compasses for another several hundred years.)

Galileo's navigation proposal. Before the chronometer was invented, navigators had no good idea of local time, therefore seldom knew exactly where they were when out of sight of land. Galileo suggested using the positions of Jupiter's moons as a universal clock. (Seamen weren't interested, and, according to J.D. Bernal, it wouldn't have worked anyway. Such times would not be reliable unless the speed of light were allowed for...and in Galileo's time no one had any idea what that was.)

The m in e=mc2. If you could weigh the electrical energy generated in a thousand-megawatt power plant each day it would come to about one-thirtieth of an ounce.

Galileo on suction pumps. He knew they couldn't lift water more than 32 feet but didn't know why: His theory was that that was the limit of the "tensile strength" of water.

Recognizing Mafia corpses. A Sicilian medical examiner claims he can always tell when an unidentified body is a Mafioso from the ulcers of its internal organs, caused by the stress of that career.

A telescope as big as the Ritz. Refractors may make a comeback if astronomers ever

On her deathbed, Gertrude Stein muttered, "What is the answer?" Then she thought it over and a moment later, just before dying, she added, "What is the question?"



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get their hands on enough of the right materials to make a really big lens. What's the right material? Why, a perfect diamond weighing several tons. Expensive, sure, but it would have about the best optics you could imagine—f0.2, or thereabouts.

How high is a mountain? The maximum height a mountain can reach is the height at which the pressure of the mass of rock in the mountain reaches about one-tenth the molecular binding force of the stratum the mountain rests on. When it gets higher than that, the substrate begins to soften and the mountain begins to sink. Mars' mountains are just about at that maximum height. Not Earth's, though; the theoretical maximum for a terrestrial mountain would be about 80 miles, and even Everest is less than a tenth of that. (The reason: Earth's mountains are continually eroded away by wind and water as they grow, and Mars' aren't.)

How much is a Newton? A Newton is the standard scientific unit of mass. Through a happy coincidence, it turns out to be just about the mass of an average apple.

Babbling babies. Normal babies go through a "babble stage" at about one year, probably a sort of rehearsal for learning to talk. Profoundly deaf babies don't babble vocally but do make frequent, random-appearing gestures called "manual mode babbling."

Ring the Sun. The surface of the Sun vibrates in and out, like the shell of a churchbell. Its period is about five minutes; if it could be heard as audible sound, it would be 16 octaves below middle C.

Chicago time. Until 1883 every big city in the United States, and almost a hundred smaller ones as well, had its own time, usually setting their noon as the moment when the sun was highest over their local city hall. Most people didn't mind, but it was hell on the ones who made up railroad timetables, so that fall the railroads called a General Time Convention in Chicago, at a hotel located at the corner of Jackson Boulevard and LaSalle Street. They voted to establish four time zones, and on Sunday, November 18th of that year, every railroadman in America reset his watch to the new local time. Wonderfully, so did everybody else in America, though Congress didn't make it official until 1918.

Naming the toes. Although each finger has its own Latin medical name, toes don't—so far. To remedy this injustice, a Yale med school professor has proposed scientific names for them, starting with the big toe: *Porcellus fori* (meaning piglet at market), *P. domi* (p. at home), *P. carnivori* (meat-eating p.), *P. non voratus* (p. not having eaten) and *P. plorans domum* (p. crying homeward).

And finally, one of my favorites:

Perils of Soviet spaceflight. Landing in wilderness after the Voshkod-2 mission, the cosmonauts had to remain in their spacecraft until rescuers arrived. Reason: there were bears prowling around the forests and they were afraid they would be eaten. □



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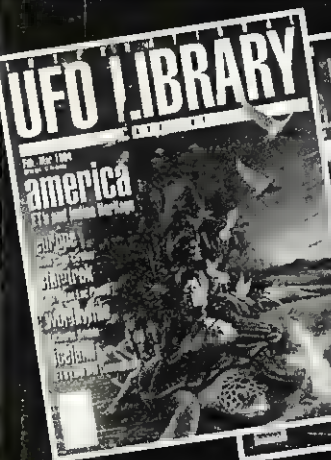
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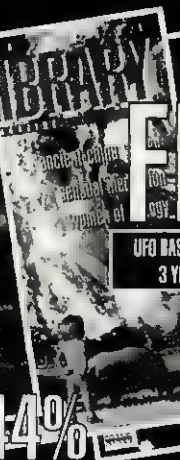
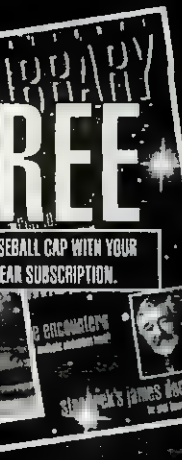
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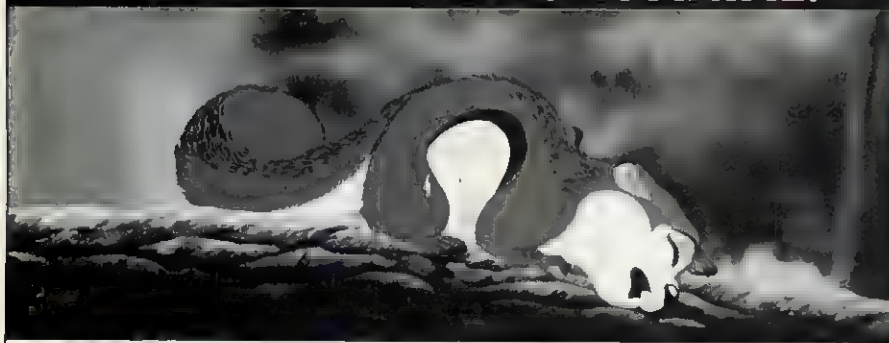
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SCIENCE

Continued from page 32

galaxies. We have only one planet in use at the moment, but you'd think that with a little effort in the next few billion years we could occupy maybe a few billion. And then we'd be fireproof. It would be very difficult to destroy everybody and everything.

ANDREWS: When I was interviewing for that one job at the White House a few years ago, the man I was going to work for asked me why we should have a space program. He was a scientist and engineer, but he didn't believe in space travel. He asked why we should have one at all. I said, "Ultimately, we need to get all of our eggs out of one basket. We need to scatter the number of eggs in several baskets. That's why we should go to Mars and so on, so if ecological or technological catastrophe overwhelms one place, you have some human beings somewhere else." He was quiet after that. At least he didn't argue anymore.

SHEFFIELD: And you got the job?

ANDREWS: Ultimately. I got the job, yes.

SHEFFIELD: When you say that we should do something to protect ourselves, people then have to evaluate whether they believe there's a risk. They may not believe there's a real risk. Remember James Watt's comment, about why there was no need to worry about protecting the forests when he was Secretary of the Interior? He said, "Well, the Second Coming will be along pretty soon."

ANDREWS: Which brings us around full circle.

SHEFFIELD: If you have sufficient religious belief, then you will not worry about the future. It's the God-will-provide argument, that you don't need to worry about asteroids because God will take care of it. You don't need to worry about having 15 kids and them starving, because God will take care of it. It's a very dangerous assumption.

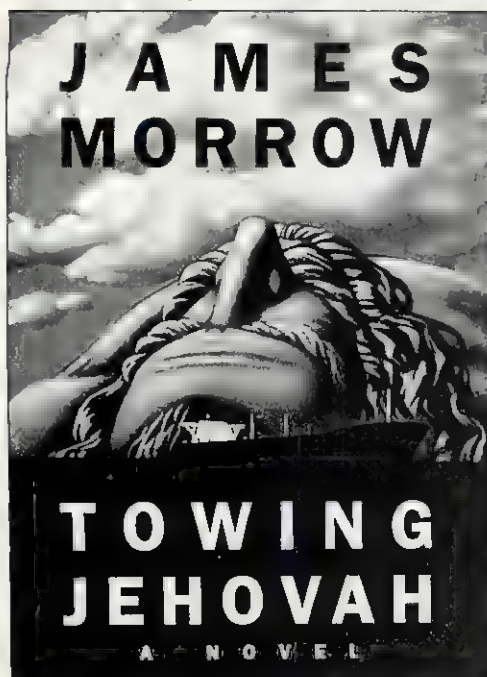
ANDREWS: I'd worry about the asteroid. God might be pissed.

SHEFFIELD: Within 125 years, there will be a human colony either in space, or on Mars, or on some other planetary body. So we will escape the main danger, that we will do something to the Earth ourselves to make it uninhabitable for humans, but not for cockroaches. I used to think 25 years. I'm either getting more realistic, or more pessimistic, but I think we won't have a space colony in 25 years. I'd love to be wrong. In 125 years I can't believe we won't. If we don't have it, I hope I'm not here to see it. Does that make double negative sense?

ANDREWS: In 100 years how many people do you think we'll have frozen in cryonics waiting for resurrections?

SHEFFIELD: I think there'll be a lot of them, and I think they'll be the main food for the people who are left. I was on a cryonics panel in San Francisco, and I was very unpopular for being skeptical that people

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would *care* to wake you up. They'd only wake you up if you were interesting. I'm pessimistic about the *short-term* future of humans, but I don't think we'll kill ourselves off. I think we have a long, long future. In that way I'm an optimist.

ANDREWS: I was interviewed by a newspaper reporter in 1989 when I was the guest of honor at a convention in Indiana. He was a young fellow, and he wanted to hear all the bad things I had to say about living in the future that I'd always foreseen as a kid in the '50s. I said it was wonderful. He said, "What do you mean wonderful? We have AIDS and we have turmoil in Europe and wars and plagues." And I said, "We made it through." My daily routine in the 1950s after I had heard about the atomic bomb as a child was to get ready to "duck and cover." All of my adult life—until my 30s, when I realized I didn't care what happened, I had to live my life—I fully expected at any time in my waking time or sleeping time to be awakened by a flash and watch my house and my world collapse around me and have to try to survive in some sort of barbaric post-nuclear holocaust world. I really believed that. I think millions of us did. So when the Soviet Union dissolved Christmas Day of 1991, this was a great weight lifted off my shoulders. But in 1989, when I was talking to this reporter, I had fully expected that if I were alive, I'd be in some post-holocaust landscape, and have to fight for everything, and be surrounded by mutants. But it didn't happen. I told him I thought that was fantastic. He was very irritated. He wanted to talk about doom and gloom, and I was just happy to be alive, and happy that the human race was still alive.

SHEFFIELD: I have a personal experience from around the time of Desert Storm. I'd been down in Chattanooga. I'd flown back late at night into Washington, D.C. and I was in bed, when there was a long, long rumble of thunder and flashes of light associated with it. I gave serious consideration at that point to the idea that an atomic bomb had gone off in Washington. So there are still things to worry about.

ANDREWS: I think as a race that the world is probably less subject to nuclear holocaust now than it's been at any time since the Russians have gotten their bombs. I imagine that any given spot in the world is in more danger, but the world as a whole is in less danger. I've been a pessimist all this time, but the world has survived in spite of all my pessimism, so that makes me an optimist. So now it's time to worry.

SHEFFIELD: It makes no difference whether you're a pessimist or an optimist. It's like the fly sitting on the axle of the chariot in Aesop's fable, that remarks on all the dust it's creating. I think we're just carried along by events, and whether we're an optimist or a pessimist doesn't make any difference. Therefore, it's better to be an optimist, because you have more fun. □



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Schwartz had declared himself a god.
It was up to Martin to discover whether the madman
had forged Altair V into a heaven—or a hell.

AN EARLY SURVEYOR, TONGUE FIRMLY IN cheek, named it Styx—a river of molten lava running from near Altair V's north pole all the way down to its equator. It carved its way around jagged spires of obsidian, meandered across plains of rough, pitted basalt, sent glowing, fractal tributaries sprawling across half the planet. The first time I saw it, coming down fast out of the bottom cloud layer on approach to North Station, I felt like I was locking on to a landing beacon from Hell.

Which would not have been a bad name for Altair V itself. Its rocky surface tortured by volcanic activity, constantly bathed in an actinic, ultraviolet glare from its blue-white primary, cloaked in a wispy atmosphere of sulfur, ash, and carbon dioxide, it was one of the last places you would expect humans to try and carve out a foothold. But it had mineral riches beyond imagining—single crystals of emerald and sapphire the size of a jumpship, shimmering pools of molten gold, superconducting metglass splashed across the lava plains like spilled milk.

There were two mining stations on Altair V. The main station near the north pole served as the planet's spaceport, such as it was. The finicky mag-fields of the planet were weakest there and the location made for cleaner navcom. Follow Styx's spidery sprawl down to the equator and you'd hit Deep Station, clinging like a flea onto a landscape that made Earth's Dakota Badlands look like Avalon.

There was a skeleton crew of humans at both posts, a handful of andys, and a lot of expensive hardware. The mineral shipments from the planet had broken records at first, then dwindled down to a trickle in recent months. It was my job to find out why.

A yellow light was blinking on my nav-panel, indicating that I was receiving a carrier for a landing beacon but that it was rejecting hand-shaking protocol for lock-in. I tongued my radio on.

"North Station, this is the jumpship *Conrad*. North Station, this is Martin, jumpship *Conrad*. I need a lock. Repeat, I need lock."

Nothing except the hissing whisper of background static in my mastoid

speakers and the rushing sound of my own blood in my ears.

"North Station, I need a lock. Goddamnit, wake up down there."

Crackle, hiss. "*Conrad*." Very weak signal. I boosted the gain. I could barely make out the words beneath the roar of static. It sounded like two voices. "...no... Schwartz...beacon."

"Please repeat, North Station. Please repeat."

Hiss, crackle. "...turn... Schwartz... No!...."

What the hell was going on down there?

"North Sta—"

There was a sharp click in my ears and the panel light went green.

"*Conrad*, you are locked. You are locked." Signal sharp and clear.

About time, I thought. "Affirmative, North Station."

I tongued on the three-sixty display, saw a brief sparkle as the induction field wrapped around my optic nerve, and then I was sitting on empty space, streaking down into a glowing hellscape.

I followed the River Styx upstream. It flowed quickly in the middle, glowing bright yellow and fading to orange and red near the banks. Patches of black crust seemed to grow out from the banks into the main flow and break off, careening downstream. Billowing clouds obscured parts of the river, glowing red and yellow as if with an inner light.

North Station was a sprawl of domes, blockhouses, and heavy equipment, scattered across a flat plain of black glass on the high side of the river. A crude landing field was marked off by an 'X' of blue lights. Beneath the faint shimmer of an environment-field, I saw a crew of black-skinned andys crawling like ants around a large, treaded vehicle.

I tongued back into realspace just as I landed with a slight bump. I powered down the drive, unstrapped myself, and removed my helmet. I felt cold all of a sudden, naked and exposed. I had been augmented for so long, it was like removing a limb.

I got my gear and strapped a portable environment-field generator to my belt. My ears popped as I walked out the port and the ship's e-field merged briefly with my own. The sky was red in the direction of the river, fading to deep purple on either side, framed by jagged cliffs and spires. Straight overhead, blue and green auroras rippled across the

HEART OF MOLTEN STONE

BY DANIEL MARCUS

Illustration by David Beck



black sky, peeking out from behind an inconstant curtain of shredded cloud.

There were two men waiting for me at the bottom of the ramp. One of them was tall and lean, with long blond hair pulled back in a braid and a slight Asian cast to his features. His companion was almost as big around as he was tall, and it looked like solid muscle. Definitely enhanced—hormones for sure, maybe surgery. The skin on his scalp was sculpted in an elaborate series of ridges. His lip was split and swollen, glistening in the light of the landing floods.

I raised my hand in the Company salute.

"Gentlemen," Raspy buzz of enhanced subvocalization.

"You're Martin," the blond said. My jaw tingled faintly with the vibration of my mastoid speakers. "I'm Flint. This here's Drake." He nodded toward his companion.

I looked at Drake. "That lip looks nasty."

Drake returned my gaze with an expression of sullen defiance. "I fell," he said. A bubble of reddish spittle formed on his lower lip and dribbled down his chin.

I looked back at Flint. There was a faint, wry smile on his face. This clearly had something to do with the scuffle over the landing beacon, but whatever was going on here was between the two of them. I didn't want to get involved unless I had to.

"Fine," I said. "Well, you know why I'm here. Is there someplace we can talk?"

We walked across the black glass landing field toward a low cluster of prefab buildings. As we drew near, I saw that their carbon-fiberglass sides were streaked and pitted with oxidation scars. We entered a covered vestibule in front of the nearest one and walked through a doorway. My ears popped again as the e-fields adjusted.

We were in a large room, almost the size of an aircraft hangar, that clearly served as a live-work area. One end of the room was scattered with computer equipment, machine tools, and biomech gear. Spotlights mounted on ceiling tracks illuminated the area, leaving black shadows in the corners. The other end of the room was partitioned off by flimsy barriers into sleeping quarters and an eating area. A pair of andys stood motionless near a corner, gleaming, black synflesh dully reflecting the room's lights. There was something odd about them, but from this distance, I couldn't tell what.

Flint and Drake seated themselves around a large round table next to a porta-stove. Empty provisions crates served as chairs. Flint produced a bottle of clear, oily-looking fluid and three metal cups. He poured a round and handed out the cups. He looked at me expectantly.

I lifted my cup and took a sip. It was vile, some sort of compost Everclear. I hoped it wouldn't blind me.

"All right," I said, when I could talk again. "The Company sent me here to find out why production on this rock has dropped 50 percent in the last six terra-months. I'm supposed to review your procedures here, head down to Deep Station and talk to Schwartz, and take whatever action is necessary. I've been given full authority."

I looked back and forth between the two of them. The tension between them was almost a living thing. Drake was staring down into his cup, looking mean and sullen. His swollen lip gave the impression of a childish pout. Flint looked back at me with a blank expression that didn't quite mask a hint of supercilious amusement.

"Full authority," I repeated.

I kept staring at Flint. Finally, he shrugged his shoulders and looked away.

"I don't know what I can tell you," he said. "We can only ship out what we get from Deep Station—that's where most of the mining action is. Last few terra-months, though, we haven't been getting much out of Schwartz. A few days of big shipments of rock or met-glass for processing, then nothing for weeks at a time —"

Drake broke in. "He's into some intense shit down there."

Flint shot him an annoyed glance and went on. "Only reason the Company's gotten anything at all the last month is we've been cleaning out our backstock."

He paused and took a sip, holding the cup up to his lips for a long moment, looking lost in thought. Finally, he nodded, as if coming to a decision, and looked up at me. "I sent Orbison down there in the flitter a few days ago and I haven't heard anything. We have a comsat in geosynchronous orbit but it went belly up just after Orbison left, totally dead. Can't bounce signals off the ionosphere with this planet's crazy fucking mag-field. Only jumpship on-planet is down with Schwartz, too."

He shook his head, and again I thought I saw a hint of wry amusement in his expression. "So we have been stuck here, mister Company man. High and dry. Incommunicado."

I took another sip and the raw whiskey burned my throat. I turned to Drake. "What kind of shit?"

He shook his head and stared down into his cup again.

Flint laughed abruptly, a short bark. "Let's just say that Schwartz has been working outposts a little too long. It didn't matter as long as he kept up his shipments...."

"What didn't matter?"

He waved his hand at me. "I'm getting to that." He paused and took another sip of whiskey. "He seems to be acting out some sort of... *fantasy*... with his andys. Some sort of God thing."

"What are you talking about?"

"Schwartz seems to believe that his andys ... worship him."

I looked closely at him. It was ludicrous. Andys were ... andys. They had a functional bipedal form, but they were just high-melanin synflesh stretched over a fullerene endoskeleton. There was a vat-grown knot of ganglia between their ears that gave them a rudimentary vocabulary and the ability to carry out manual tasks. They were outstanding tools, but they had about as much capacity for spirituality as a toaster.

"That's crazy," I said.

Flint shrugged. "Well, yeah, but you have to understand. It's different with andys out here."

I felt a sharp jolt in the ground underneath me. The lights in the shed flickered briefly. There was another, gentler jolt.

"Quake," Flint said. "We get them all the time."

"Great," I said. I'd lived in South California for a few years when I was a kid, just before the Big One. The holos of the Los Angeles Sea still gave me the willies. I didn't want to think about what a serious quake here might do to the e-field generators. I put both hands flat on the table, trying not to show my nervousness. "What do you mean, different?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Just different. That's all. But Schwartz's really taken it around the bend." He paused. "Look, I don't know what was really going on down there—all I've got are a few radio transcripts. That's why I sent Orbison."

Drake looked like he was about to say

**I could feel
her life wink-
ing out like an
explosion in
my heart
when her field
collapses.
I am the
Redeemer. I
am the
Redeemed.**

something. I looked at him and he bit his lip and looked away. Beads of sweat glistened on his scalp ridges. Up close, I could tell that it was a home surgery job—well done, but a little sloppy. There was a fine tracery of cauterization scars around the base of the ridges.

He knew something and he wasn't talking. I would try to get him alone later on.

I turned back to Flint. "I want to see those transcripts."

He nodded. "They're online. I'll set you up for access and you can log in from the shop." He pointed to the clutter of equipment at the far end of the room.

I ACTUALLY HAD TO USE A KEYPAD—IT FELT LIKE I WAS handling an antique. Stone knives next, I thought. My fingers fumbled several times over the touch-sensitive glass and I had to start over. Finally, I accessed the file. I waited a second for the induction field to grab my optic nerve and fling the text up on my mind's eye, then I shook my head. Stupid. That's what the screen's for.

I squinted as the text scrolled down the display. It was mostly routine stuff, descriptions of shipments, maintenance logs. Then an entry caught my eye.

Always night here. I called them to me and they came, circled around me in the dark. Always dark. Alpha is my consort. The chosen one.

More routine entries, then:

I am the physical manifestation of their collective psyche. Circle 'round me in the dark. Worship me. Through me, they do not know death. I told one today to wash itself in the River Styx, heal in the blood of the lamb. It walks down to the shore, steps off into the burning flow. Black head bobbing in the fire, washing downstream in the yellow fire. E-field good for maybe a minute or two. I could feel her life winking out like an explosion in my heart when her field collapses. Alpha tells me later that this one doesn't die, lives on in the blood of the lamb. I am the Redeemer. I am the Redeemed.

I stared at the last entry for a long time, feeling a chill deep in my bones.

I logged off and went to look for Drake. The central common area was empty, and I walked around one of the partitions to the sleeping quarters.

Flint was crouched on a stool in front of an andy. He had a short knife in one hand and he was cutting carefully at the andy's lower torso. There was a red-stained rag in his free hand and he dabbed at the freely flowing blood. I was shocked for a moment at the bright redness, but it was just good engineering—andy or not, oxygen is an efficient bio-fuel and hemoglobin an excellent carrier. I walked closer to get a better look.

Flint heard my footsteps and turned around. He smiled and beckoned me closer. The andy's entire body was covered with an elaborate pattern of scars. Tightly wound spirals of scarification on its flat chest marked where a human's nipples would be. A meandering, branching lesion ran from just below the andy's chin, sending tributaries out toward its arms and legs, flowing down until it was lost in the shadowy 'V' at the andy's sexless crotch.

Flint pointed down there and chuckled. "Deep Station," he said. He dug the blade into the purple-black flesh and a thick bead of blood oozed up.

I looked at the andy's face. Deadpan, impassive. High cheekbones graced with more elaborate scarification. Eyes of deep amber. My gaze traveled down the length of its body again. The realization hit me like a slap.

"You mean this is a map?"

He chuckled again. "You catch on quick, Company man. The River Styx. Not bad, huh?"

I was horrified. "You're really sick."

He chuckled. "Maybe so, maybe so. But I told you it's different with andys out here. If you're gonna understand what's going down in Deep Station that's the first thing you gotta learn. Meet Leilani." He gestured at the andy. "Ancient Hawaiian word, means 'heavenly flower.'"

The andy looked at me.

For a crazy split second, I almost said 'hello,' but I stopped myself. "Goddamnit, Flint, what kind of game are you playing here?"

He stood up and faced me. He laid the knife on the stool behind him and held his hands out to me, palms forward. "No game. I just want to run this shop, take care of business, same as you. It's Schwartz you want to come down on, not me."

I looked into his eyes. He seemed to be telling the truth, at least as far as he knew it. "I want to talk to Drake," I said. "There's something going on between the two of you and I want to know what it is."

Flint shook his head. "Look, Drake is dumber than a box of dead crabs. He thinks that Schwartz is ... God. Or Something. It's really tiresome."

"Well, let's find him."

He sighed. "All right. Whatever."

We looked in the sleeping quarters, the shop, everywhere. No sign of him.

"I've got a bad feeling," Flint said. "Let's check your ship."

A DETERMINED PERSON WITH A HANDLASER can, with time and a little luck, ground a jumpship. A well-trained person can cripple one in no time. Drake was determined and he was well-trained. The inside of the *Conrad* was a chaotic jumble of melted plastic, fused metal, and scorched ceramic. Great swaths of bubbled plasticene arched across the ceiling. The instrument panel was a smoking ruin.

Drake lay in a corner of the cabin, a gaping wound in the side of his head, a laser in his outstretched hand. The edges of the wound were cauterized, but it still oozed a slimy pink and red discharge. An andy was sprawled next to him, most of its face burned off. I walked forward to get a closer look. Its scalp bore a similar series of sculpted ridges, and the andy's physique looked very much like Drake's—stocky and muscular.

"Hormone shots," Flint said. "Cosmetic surgery. Making it over in his image."

I looked over at him.

And you're making yours over into the image of the planet, I thought. This place is an open fucking ward.

I looked around at the damage. "This ship is never flying again," I said. "Not without a major overhaul."

Flint shook his head. A strand of blond hair fell across his face. "I didn't think he'd go this far. Not offing himself, anyway. He's been getting more and more wrapped up in Schwartz' messiah trip. When we found out you were coming, he freaked. He kept saying, 'He'll ruin everything. He'll ruin everything.'"

I nodded. That explained the scuffle when I was coming in.

"It doesn't matter anymore. There's a jumpship at Deep Station. We have to get down there. Are there any more flitters?"

Flint shook his head again. "Orbison took our only one."

"Well, there must be some way."

"We do have a couple of cargo barges. Null-g ground-effect vehicles, nothing fancy, but they'll do about 30 knots."

"That's crazy," I said. "This is some of the roughest country I've ever seen. We won't get two clicks overland."

Flint smiled grimly. "Yeah, we'll have to use the river."

I felt the blood drain from my face. "No...." The idea of riding a cargo barge for 2,000 clicks down a river of molten lava to confront a messianic lunatic had very limited appeal.

"If you can think of any alternatives, Company man, I'm all ears."

I looked at Flint. He was actually smiling.

"You're out of your fucking mind," I said.

He laughed out loud. "Styx and stones, man. Styx and stones."

WE DIDN'T HAVE MUCH TO TAKE WITH US—SOME RATIONS, a couple of handlasers. As an afterthought, I backed Schwartz's transcripts onto an infodisk. The Company was going to want some documentation on how this operation went fubar.

The cargo barge was a flat pallet of titanium and fullerene, 20 meters long by 5 meters wide, featureless except for a raised control platform at the front and a low railing that ran around its perimeter. It rode about half a meter above the ground on a cushion of null-fields. When Flint drove it out from behind one of the processing shacks, his andy was standing beside him at the controls. Their e-fields shimmered faintly in the half-dark.

I stepped over the railing and onto the barge. It rocked a little with my weight, then stabilized.

"You're bringing her?" I didn't realize until after I said it that I had referred to the andy by the female gender. It gave me a crawly feeling at the pit of my stomach.

Flint didn't seem to notice. "Yeah." Just asking me to make an issue out of it. I looked over at her. Was it my imagination, or was her chin raised in a profile of defiance?

"All right, fine. Let's do it."

It was about half a klick to the river, through a tortured landscape of rough hills and gaping fissures. Flint drove quickly over the rough ground, managing to avoid the worst of it. The barge rocked slightly with the unevenness of the terrain. The river glowed orange from behind the hills in front of us, the glow intensifying as we approached.

We rounded a cliff of jagged obsidian and there it was in front of us, a vein of flowing, liquid fire, 50 meters wide. A large rock jutted out of the stream near the middle and the lava splashed over it, solidifying into crystalline streamers in mid-air and falling back into the flow.

The river was different this close up. There was almost a presence about it, a spirit.

Flint eased the barge to a stop. "Styx," he said. He wasn't smiling this time. He pointed to the rock in the middle.

"Whatever you do, don't get caught up on one of those. This thing spills and we wind up in the drink. Your e-field'll polarize. It's good for maybe two minutes before it overloads. Then you're history."

I nodded. "Let's go."

We eased forward, off the bank and into the river. The ride felt different over the flowing lava, smoother and more stable. Every now and then we lurched slightly as the null-g field passed over density inhomogeneities in the flow.

We floated out to the center of the river, pointed downstream, and gradually picked up speed, leaving a viscous, 'V'-shaped wake stretching out behind us.

After a little while, the river widened and the cliffs on either side fell away. The river was so calm and flat we could have been riding on solid ground—except for the occasional bubble that rose up from the depths, stretched the skin of the surface into a glowing, yellow hemisphere, and popped, sending a spray of liquid rock in all directions.

I sat on the flat bottom of the barge behind Flint and Leilani, watching their silhouettes rock gently with its motion, looking over the side at the lava speeding past. If you looked closely, you could see shifting patterns in the flow, honeycomb-shaped convection cells growing, merging, collapsing. It was hypnotic. I felt myself sinking into a light doze and I went with it. Flickering dreams, snapshots of flowing fire. Drake's dead eyes looking through me. Glowing jagged scar ripping down Leilani's body, tearing her open. Head and shoulders emerging from the blistered wound, pushing back the seared flesh like snakeskin. Long ascetic face, sad eyes. I recognized the face from the files I'd studied. Schwartz. *Schwartz*.

"Why don't you take the conn for a while?" Flint said, his buzzing

She could
have saved
him. Flint
lost his grip.
His scream
buzzed in
my mastoid
speakers
as he
disappeared
into the fire.

voice on my mastoid speaker shaking me into wakefulness. "I need a break."

The controls were simple and primitive—wheel for steering, foot pedals for speed. Flint and Leilani went to the rear of the barge and sat looking out at the glowing wake.

I thought about Schwartz, about the andys, about this hellrun down the River Styx. I felt like there was a lot more going on here than was obvious on the surface, like there was some sort of metaphysical understructure that would click into place for me if only I had the key.

Schwartz. I'd been sent out to punch his clock, but riding toward him down this river of fire I was beginning to feel an odd kinship with him. I wanted to talk to him, to try to understand him.

I looked behind me. Flint and Leilani were sitting with their arms around each other, their merged e-fields like a single coruscating glove, silhouetted against the orange glow of the river and the black sky.

I turned away, my cheeks burning with embarrassment.

THE RIVER WAS STARTING TO NARROW again. Cliffs rose on either side, until we sped down the bottom of a deep, rugged gorge. Red light reflected from the molten river flickered off the obsidian cliffs. Flint had walked up from the back of the barge and was standing beside me. I looked over at him and nodded, and we stood there together for a while, looking out at the river.

I didn't know how to ask him what I needed to know. I was curious about his

andy, confused. I needed to understand.

"Flint," I said. "You and your andy... Leilani."

"Yes?"

"What do you... what do you do?"

"You mean sexually?"

"Well, yes.... No. I mean, in part, yeah, but really, what *is* it between you?"

I thought he would get angry but he only smiled that enigmatic grin of his and shook his head.

"I don't think I can explain it. We have a ... connection."

The ride was starting to get a little rough as we hit some rapids. I held onto the steering wheel and looked behind me. Leilani was sitting at the rear of the boat, facing forward, braced against the back rail.

I looked back at Flint. He smiled again. "You understand, Company man. You do. You're just not ready to own it yet."

The barge lurched and he grabbed a rail for support. He looked ahead and his eyes widened. I followed his gaze.

Up ahead, the river narrowed further, the speeding flow at the center glowing a bright yellow. Then, the river disappeared abruptly. *Falls*.

We looked at each other for a long moment. I wanted to say something to him, but I didn't know what. Then he braced himself against the railing and I tightened my grip on the wheel.

We went over the edge and the bottom dropped out of my stomach. Ahead of me I saw a 20-meter drop down a crystalline channel of glowing stone into a cauldron of roiling fire.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion.

A sheet of lava washed up over the bow of the barge, freezing into glassy stone as it hit the deck. It sent a molten tongue lapping at my feet and splashing up my legs. I felt a moment of intense heat before my e-field polarized, wrapping my thighs in a skintight fun-house mirror that faded to transparency as the lava cooled. I kicked

the crust from my legs and held on to the wheel.

Beside me, Flint lost his grip. I saw him tumble and slide back the length of the barge and grab the back railing. He didn't have much of a grip, though, and I could see him struggling to hang on.

Leilani was back there, too, braced securely against the frame of the barge. She could have reached out and helped him. I saw it clearly. There was the space of a heartbeat, maybe two, when she could have reached out her hand and saved him.

His scream buzzed in my mastoid speakers as he lost his grip and disappeared into the fire.

Suddenly, everything was calm again. We were floating downstream bobbing on the lava current. The falls behind us appeared impossibly high. I looked, but saw no sign of Flint. I turned the barge around and sped back to the base of the falls. I got as close as I could, and looked for him long past the time his e-field would have failed. He was gone.

Leilani had come up to the com. I turned to her and grabbed her shoulders. My ears popped as our e-fields equilibrated and merged. "What's wrong with you?" I shouted. "You could have saved him!"

She looked impassively back at me. Her ebony skin glowed in the hellish light and her scars stood out in bold relief.

"Love..." she said. I'd never heard her speak before and her voice was like the sound of metallic bees, low and without inflection.

I reached back and struck her with the back of my hand as hard as I could. Her head jerked back and a trickle of blood flowed from the corner of her mouth.

"Not..."

I struck her again. Her lip split open.

"Power."

I balled up my fist and struck her again. She staggered back, tripped over the railing, and fell into the molten flow. Her head bobbed in the current as I left her behind. Moments later, far behind me, I saw the flash as her e-field failed.

I DRIFTED DOWNSTREAM ON A RIVER OF BLOODY FIRE. I thought about Leilani's words. Love not power. Did she mean that she loved Flint but that didn't give her the power of life and death over him? Or that what he thought was love for her was power, and she rejected it? Or was it an admonition? I didn't know. I didn't think I ever would.

By the time the cluster of crude shacks that was Deep Station came into view, all I knew was that I wanted it to be over.

There was a head on a titanium pole in front of the largest shack. It was mummified by the thin, corrosive atmosphere, but it was recognizably human. Orbison.

I found Schwartz behind the buildings on a small rise, overlooking the base and the river. He was stretched out on a crude fullerene cross, his arms and legs secured to the beams by loops of wire. His e-field flickered around his head like a halo. I recognized the symbolism, of course—I'd studied archaic forms of worship.

He'd been out there a long time—he was almost dead from dehydration. I cut him down and brought him into the main shack. There were no andys about, but the whole time, I had the feeling I was being watched.

I laid him down on a bunk, tried to dribble some water between his cracked lips. Held somewhere in the lines of those ravaged features, I could see the face from my dream. Lean, aristocratic cheekbones. A deep sadness.

"What happened here?" I asked. "Did they do this on their own or did you put them up to it?"

His eyes fluttered open and his pupils wandered, not tracking on anything, then they seemed to focus on me. He grabbed my shirt and pulled me close to him. He struggled, as if trying to summon up the strength to speak.

"They ... suffer." Each word came with an incredible effort. "Live ... in us ... manifest ... expiate."

He let go of my shirt and closed his eyes. He shuddered once and was still.

I sat there looking at him for what seemed like a long time. I didn't

understand, I didn't understand anything, but I knew what I had to do.

I found the station's fusion plant, knocked out the safety interlocks, and set it to overload. I had about an hour. It wouldn't be much of a bang, maybe a kiloton, but it would be enough.

When I reached the top of the ramp to the jumpship, I turned around. They were coming out onto the landing field, about 20 of them, identical except for the one at the lead. She had a long ascetic face, lean aristocratic features, a deep intelligence burning in her eyes.

We looked at each other for a long moment, then I turned around and closed the hatch behind me.

The trip back to North Station took about five minutes. After I did what I needed to do, I lifted up to about 1,000 clicks and looked back at the fiery chaos of a planet tearing itself apart. The River Styx looked like a cracked and blistered wound, leaking pus.

A perfect disc, searing white, blossomed near the equator and faded to a dull red. Seconds later, another one blossomed in the north.

I HAD ABOUT A TERRA-WEEK OF ACCELERATION to match velocities with Sol system before making the jump. I wrote out my report.

Bioinfestation. Sterilization mandated. Regrettable but necessary.

It was a lie, but I had no idea what truth was in all this mess. Truth was Drake's body sprawled like a limp doll amid the wreckage of my jumpship. Truth was Flint's life winking out in a white, searing flash, while the reflection of the River Styx flickered in Leilani's amber eyes. Truth was Orbison's head on a post and Schwartz stretched out like a tin Jesus bearing the weight of all our sins and folly. The truth was a ghost, a shadow, a whisper. The only thing I was sure of was that I was tired.

When I got back to Gateway Station and filed my report, I found out that Schwartz had a wife somewhere on Luna. I was passing through there on my way to Earth, so I decided to look her up. I wasn't sure why, but it felt like something I had to do.

We agreed to meet in a bar I knew with a magnificent holoview of the Sea of Tranquility. We were actually about a click underground, but it looked completely real. I arrived early and got a table next to the window. The landscape was a study in contrast—bright gray where the sun lanced off the surface, deep black where the surface lay in shadow.

I heard a rustling in front of me and looked up. She was beautiful. I knew she would be. I wasn't at all surprised at her aquiline features, the cool intelligence in her eyes, her smooth, dark skin. Schwartz' black Madonna.

We sat together looking out at the moonscape for what seemed like a long time. Words didn't seem necessary. Then she turned to me.

"Were you with him when he died?"

I nodded.

"Did he ... say anything? Any last words?"

I thought about it for a moment. I could tell her the whole story. I could try.

"Yes," I heard myself saying. "He said to tell you that he loved you. That's all."

Her eyes grew moist. It must have been a trick of the light, but they seemed to flash amber for an instant, the way a cat's eyes will glow briefly as it turns its head. She touched my hand.

"Thank you," she said.

We sat there together for a little while longer, then I excused myself.

"Ship to catch," I said.

She nodded, smiled, and took my hand. When I got to the door I turned around and looked back. She was still sitting there at the table, her head slightly inclined, looking out at the flat, lifeless plain. She must have sensed my gaze, because suddenly she looked over at me. I raised my hand. She nodded with a slow, sad smile. Benediction or release, I wasn't sure, but it was enough. It was over. I nodded back, turned around, and got out of there. □

Virtual reality promises us all a world of plenty.
But as we race along the Information Superhighway,
not everything we find will be a blessing.

CURSE OF THE CYBERHEAD'S WIFE

BY BRUCE BOSTON

Illustration by Michael Wright

WHEN HE RETURNS FROM HOURS SPENT wired in goggles and headset and bulky gloves, he appears disassociated and indifferent, as if the physical world that surrounds him—*her world!*—is somehow less real than the machine reality he has left behind. When his projected consciousness comes back from plumbing the far depths and reaches of the virtual net at speeds that taste the velocity of light, searching for a precious string of bytes to filch, some rare datum that will make their fortune—rumors of a corporate takeover, a sky-ball tourney where the fix is on, a scandalous scoop on some holo celeb that could be cashiered into blackmail or sold to the dailies—when he surfaces from such intrepid cerebral journeys, exhausted and empty-handed, he remains entrapped for further hours in the mind-set of what has come to be known as cyberspatial lag.

He acts as if he has been deep-spacing it solo to a distant star system for years, recycling his own thoughts until he has evolved to a creature unto himself. He reminds her of a political hostage she saw on the holo, a man held captive by cross-dimensional terrorists in an alternate pocket universe where all the aspects of normal existence—from the complex dynamics of physics to the mechanics of a simple human touch—were no longer operative.

His speech is both slurred and clipped.



Although he acknowledges her presence, he seems incapable of calling her by name, either her given name or any of the endearments he once showered upon her.

His movements are uncoordinated. Ordinary objects, taking on a life of their own, leap from his hands. He spills his coffee, burns his fingers lighting a smoke, stumbles into the furniture and walls.

Overruling his halfhearted protests, his enfeebled resistance, she must guide him to bed and rest before he injures himself. And while he sleeps a sleep like that of the dead, she sits by his side and watches over him, wondering who or what the man she married has become. Wondering why his true nature eludes her and the only identities she can now attach to him are ones swathed in simile and metaphor.

When the sun through the bedroom curtains overcomes the muted lamplight from the bedside table and fills the room with day, she starts awake to find him still unconscious. She notices how papery white and translucent his flesh has become. She winces at the unhealthy glow that clings to his features even in sleep. The feverish glow of a lunatic. The unapproachable glow of a crippled saint.

EACH TIME HE RETURNS FROM HIS ARMCHAIR travels, they must get to know one another all over again. So she plies him with food and drink, with sex that she must always initiate—a pale shade of encounters she recalls with bittersweet lust—until he has returned at last to some semblance of the human being she had once known and still loves, until his eyes meet hers with a sense of recognition and she can coax a smile, a few scraps of conversation, from his faded lips.

She doesn't have him to herself for long.

No sooner does he return to a semblance of normality than he is again ready to don the paraphernalia of his newfound passion and dive unquestioningly into the limitless electronic abyss. He leaves her in mid-sentence and disappears into the spare bedroom she has come to call his dim room, both because of its abridged illumination and because of its effect on their lives together, a dampening of all the emotions they once shared.

Within moments of his departure he could just as easily be walking the surface of the moon or treading deep within the subaqueous canyons of the Marianna Trench.

SHE RETURNS FROM WORK TO FIND HIM AS SHE HAS LEFT him. She cracks the door to his sanctum and stands quietly in a lightless hallway to spy upon him in the dimness beyond.

It doesn't matter. She could turn on every light in the house, invite the neighbors over for a drunken orgy, blast the latest hard metal holos at full volume until base thunder vibrated the ceiling and walls and sent chips of loose plaster showering down upon him. Through it all he would remain oblivious.

For moments at a time he sits motionless, hardly breathing, as immobile as the console he confronts. At other times he moves like a swimmer, a dream swimmer, gracefully stroking the air about him as if it has taken on the consistency and resistance of water. Then

he startles her, and no matter how many times she has seen this transformation, it startles her again. All at once he becomes a whirligig of motion in place. Legs pumping. Torso twisting in the restraints that hold him upright. Subvocal utterances spilling over into vocal gibberish, leaving glistening trails of spittle that run from the corners of his mouth like snail tracks. His hands and fingers, swathed, paw the air, grasping and wielding objects invisible to her, the countless wires extending from each fingertip, from his palms and feet and other vital locations, writhing like the tentacles of a supernumerary octopus.

Even as such images assault her sensibilities, she realizes that the truth of his identity continues to escape her. Similes from the animal kingdom are 180 degrees off the mark. He is not becoming like an animal, but like the machine to which he is attached, or more to the point, a mindless insect extension of that machine. A drone whose future is genetically determined and inescapably mapped. A fly caught in the solidification of amber.

As the darkness and silence of the house close about her, as all of her universe is reduced to the claustrophobic confines of this narrow hall and the repetitive scene that captivates her in the room beyond—it is at moments like this that her paranoia takes flight. She begins to suspect that he is unfaithful to her in a way she could have never anticipated, that he has taken an interactive lover on the net.

She has heard devotees of virtual travel claim that they now traverse a world where everything is possible, where anyone can become anything. And if such claims are true, the erotic possibilities must be infinite. There is no way she can compete with his fantasies realized. One amorous scenario after another plummets through her mind. Classic love stories, the stuff of legend, now inflame her with jealousy. She sees him as Mark Antony and her invisible foe as Cleopatra. He is Troilus and she is Cressida, reliving their eternal myth. He is Andiron Snow chasing the diaphanous Chrysalis Crystal across the ice fields of Ganymede, through the labyrinth of the Martian cave-hives, catching her and losing her again, engaged in a manic erotic foreplay that is all-consuming and knows no consummation.

"HACKERS' ANONYMOUS?" HE LAUGHS AND SHRUGS IT OFF the first time she mentions it. "Have you lost your mind? I'm doing this for us, not because I want to. And I think I'm really onto something. It's just a matter of time now before we can leave all of *this* behind." His expression of disgust sums up the dismal environs of their conapt, what he apparently now considers the equally dismal limits of their lives.

"Hackers' Anonymous!" he explodes with anger when she brings it up a second time. "I told you I can quit anytime I want!" he shouts, dismissing the subject with one swipe of a trembling hand—his wrist so thin!—echoing the words of all addicts of all persuasions at all times and ages, repeating the litany of self-denial common to those who are always the last to perceive or acknowledge their obsessions.

SINCE SHE CAN NO LONGER SEEM TO REACH HIM, SINCE she cannot retrieve him body or soul in the world they share

As the darkness and silence of the house close about her, she begins to suspect that he is unfaithful to her in a way she could have never anticipated... that he has taken an interactive lover on the net.

For a few seconds he actually remains by her side before he morphs to an avian that could never exist in reality—part eagle, part hummingbird, part rocket—and darts away into the distance.

together, she decides she must pursue him into the world he now inhabits and confront him on his own terrain. He has told her that she doesn't have the aptitude or the patience to learn to walk the net...let alone fly by his side. She is insulted on the first count. On the second, she has long since realized that *he* is the one who lacks the patience to teach her.

While he remains shrouded in dimness, immersed in brilliant visions, at home and yet never at home, she goes to a virtual training center. Exhausting the last of their credit, she embarks upon a crash course in the rudiments of the interactive net. The instructor is so young, so boyishly enthusiastic, she begins for the first time in her life to question her own youth. She is all at once more acutely aware of the months and years slipping away.

During her introductory lesson—even before they have fitted her with headset and gloves, before they have mapped her neural pathways—she learns a fact that astonishes her. There is not one net but many. There is a public net, available to all. There are various commercial nets available to all for a fee. And there are the business and government networks, private realms that can only be accessed by those with the proper clearance. And further, all of these nets are mutually exclusive!

If this is the case, she realizes that he has been lying to her all along. There is no way he can return from his travels with some precious byte to make their fortune and change their lives. He has not been in pursuit of a future reality for both of them, but merely seeking a daily escape from reality for himself.

WHEN SHE MANAGES TO CORNER AND CONFRONT HIM IN one of his few moments of relative clarity, he shrugs it off.

"Of course there's more than one net," he tells her, "but they're all interconnected, subsets of the superhighway. They're all on the same cables. I've visited dozens of nets. You just have to learn the codes. You have to learn how to trespass in disguise, without leaving a trace of your passage."

Even if this is a complete fabrication, it only makes him seem all the more helpless in her eyes. There is no way she can abandon him now. So aptitude or not, haltingly at first, with other novices like herself, she begins to explore the world he knows so well, a world that turns out to be nothing like what she imagined.

She finds the net both less and more real than she had anticipated. Less authentic in its imitation of life. More intense, demanding and full of promise than any life she has known. It is a world of simplified objects, sheer surfaces and abridged sensory impressions. Yet if it lacks the porous textures, the variety and depth of reality, it also lacks the boredom and tedium. Most of all, most appealing of all, it is a world of adventure without danger, chance without the possibility of loss. One can fall in love and lose love and find love again in the space of an afternoon. One can live a thousand lives and die a thousand deaths to emerge resurrected and seemingly unscathed. And always there is another level, another fascinating landscape to explore and conquer, another adventure to undertake.

As she masters and moves beyond the rudiments of virtual travel,

as her lessons accumulate, she grudgingly begins to understand the attraction he feels. She begins to savor the net's instantaneous gratifications in her own right. She realizes at last the validity of the terms in which she has been forced to define him...for the net itself is a complex web of simile and metaphor, a raft of veils and illusions, a world where anything can become anything else...where, as the ancient mystics once proclaimed, everything is everything.

HE IS AT FIRST SURPRISED WHEN SHE insists on joining him, but he is already too far gone, too avid for his own fix, to voice much of a protest. As they descend together into cyberspace, he leads her to a wooded clearing, a simple pastoral dream that she has seen before but has yet to explore. For a few seconds he actually remains by her side before he morphs to an avian that could never exist in reality—part eagle, part hummingbird, part rocket—and darts away into the distance to pierce the azure shell of the sky and vanish.

She moves forward cautiously, through a grove of symmetrical trees, exploring at her own speed. She wades across a shallow stream, its waters far cleaner and more sparkling than any stream she has seen in nature. She can actually feel a pleasant chill as the dampness soaks through to her feet. On the farther shore a large butterfly flits from flower to flower. She mentally summons it to light upon her hand. On closer examination it lacks the physical details of a real insect. It is clearly a simulacrum, but the swirls of color upon its wings are so beautiful she doesn't care.

The trees soon thin to a gently rolling plain dotted with sage and scotch broom. Purple-hued mountains appear in the distance, far enough away so they are indistinguishable from mountains seen in real life. She drops to all fours, concentrates, and remembers her lessons. Hooves sprout from her hands and feet. Her body lengthens and takes on a coat of light brown fur. She begins to lope across the plain, awkwardly at first but then with increasing skill. She can feel her virtual talents growing by the minute. She is fully aware, so very aware, of the promise of more to come.

SIDE BY SIDE IN THE DIMNESS, TOGETHER AND APART, nearly touching but never touching, the flickering lights of the console dappling their shadow figures in chromatic patterns. This is how they will find them. Wasted and reeking and covered with tendrils of dust caked to grime upon their temples and cheeks, goggled and gloved, retinas maniacally REMing and bodies thrashing in the grotesque spasms of the cyber addict. Unless they find them too late. Then they will be motionless, blind eyes staring fixedly upon their final illusions of choice.

For now they flash the coordinates of imaginary space. And sometimes for an instant, a spark of recognition flares as they pass one another on the lightways in fast pursuit of phantoms or fellow travelers with desires akin to their own. Yet neither has the time nor the inclination to acknowledge the other's existence. □

In the year 2037, Rigoberto Chavez is running out of time. Only by leaping back 35 years can he hope to find—

SOMETHING OF CONSEQUENCE

BY ROBIN WILSON

Illustration by Broeck Steadman

WHERE WE'RE GOING, Bundy's Bar, didn't get its name from a saloon," Rigoberto Chavez says to his equipment tech, business partner and lover, as he replaces some optoelectrics with the new biochips. It is a sparkling morning in early October 2037, three days before temporal penetration. They are busy with cabling and test protocols in their on-site ops center, which is built according to code with wind-rattled recycled styrene. "Name came from a stretch of gravel in the North Fork of the Calaveras River, just over the ridge from where the town is in target time."

"That's—what? June 2002?" says Kate Twomey. The sun diffused through the pale blue of the walls glazes her face.

"Yeah, target time. But the time I'm talking about was around the middle of the 19th century."

They have put the last of their line of credit on this one, all or nothing, and he is nervous, striding back and forth beside the floor excavation where the transporter shell will rest, talking a little more





than usual, concentrating on future hopes to avoid thinking about past failures.

"There was this guy named Bundy," continues Chavez, "who owned a mother lode warehouse, and one day he went down to the riverbank on a picnic with some of his girls. Went out behind a manzanita bush to take a crap and when he scabbled in the sand to bury the deed, he turned up what they call rich color."

"So the bar in Bundy's Bar is like in sand bar?" says Twomey, flicking her screen across the chronoform manual she is consulting.

"Yeah. Actually, gravel bar."

Twomey wishes Chavez wasn't so worried about money. And then her thoughts drift and she imagines a Seurat riverbank scene with a bearded Bundy (wearing Rigo's handsome face) in a Stetson, too early in the century for a bowler, fumbling his galluses over his shoulders and then waving excitedly to the women in long slim gowns, too early for bustles, too hot for manifold petticoats. She pictures tumbling white water over gray stones in stark mountain sunlight.

Wind rattles the styrene. Twomey looks up from her screen, smiling, her blue eyes bright: "Found some gold, did he Rigo?"

"Lots of it," says Chavez. "He put the girls to work and hired two Maidu Indians at gun point. In three days and nights the bunch of them dredged out a fortune before the strike played out."

Chavez surveys the jumbled desolation of the landfill site to the south; it reminds him of his weeks of National Service in Armagh, after the IRA nuke in the late '20s. He seeks a sweeter image and tries to picture Twomey in a long gown instead of the blue nylon coveralls that usually conceal her slim, athletic body. He has seen her both unclothed and otherwise clothed, in her bedroom and his, on the beach near Oxnard, in restaurants, and at the Mark Taper Forum, but never in anything like a long gown. An Alice-blue gown in his fantasies. He remembers the song from an earlier penetration. He wishes she were not so worried about the firm's debt.



don't—why don't we just, you know, make it legal?"

"And have a kid?" she says. "We could probably get a permit."

"Sure."

"OK. I don't know why we don't." Twomey echoes his blithe tone. She rolls onto his chest, her breasts flattened between them, and looks into his eyes and touches a finger to his receding hairline. "Maybe we should." She wishes he were more sure of himself, sure of them.

But the idea of commitment thins over subsequent weeks, like a melody too seldom heard. In an overcrowded world where children and domesticity are somehow a little incorrect, they settle uneasily for being only a little more than lovers, a little more than business part-

ners; a relationship they accept as typical of their times, one without consequences.

IN THE OPS CENTER THAT MORNING, TWOMEY says: "So they struck it rich, hey." She rises to stretch and look out onto the sunwashed street across the barriers marking the verge of the Anaheim Seismic Reconstruction Zone and the old landfill it has exposed, where their plastihut clatters. She stands for a moment close to Chavez, their shoulders and hips touching briefly. A gang of school-bound children run chattering and laughing past and she follows them with her eyes. They remind her of her gruesome months in Lahore.

She shakes her head to cast out the image and turns to Chavez: "What happened after this Grundy, this exploiter of working-class women hit it big?"

"Bundy. He was actually a pretty good guy. He paid off the Indians and settled the girls with dowries. Married his madam and fathered a big family and founded the town. He lived there up into his 80s."

"You sound kind of envious."

"Well, maybe I am. It was a simpler world then."

Twomey says: "Yeah, different world. Different values."

Chavez shrugs, suddenly reminded of how poorly they did on the contract with the Brits for the Windsor Castle artifact reclamation. "If they ever loosen up temporal shift law to allow recreational use, I'd like to go back to the Gold Rush and poke around. Maybe even pan some gold and stash it where I can find it in hometime. Last I noticed, gold was running 12 hundred bucks an ounce in the *Times*."

"Me too," says Twomey, eyeing another gaggle of kids. "I really like some things about those old times."

BUT THOSE ARE CHILDISH FANTASIES, CHAVEZ THINKS, three days later and almost 35 years earlier, in mid-June 2002, as he clears the eastern outskirts of Modesto and heads into the morning sun. His big frame is crammed into one of the little cars Detroit stamped out after OPEC II in 1998 made every car rental firm go electric. The firm's contract with the California Department of Corrections will pay off only upon delivery of the promised services, and he has less than 36 hours left before his transporter shell, buried in what is this year a fresh Orange County landfill, will snap back to hometime, with or without him.

AS USUAL FOR TWOMEY AND Chavez, nothing significant has come of their liaison. Children of their times, both are veterans of one of the many brief, bloody United Nations actions aimed at ending tribalism in the second decade of the 21st century, and like many born after the turn of that century, they fear permanent union and the invasion of self and acceptance of vulnerability it implies. And yet they are lovers, yet hoping for permanency.

Chavez satisfies his itch for adventure by exploring other times and places, not people. Twomey protects herself by mirroring the coolness she encounters. She is distrustful of passion. In a sea of values casually acquired and just as casually discarded, she is sure only of her own technical competence.

Even so, one night the previous winter, after leisurely sex uncomplicated for a change by the virtual reality enhancements that Twomey calls "all that trendy crap," they lie in lust's lassitude and Chavez says with affected casualness: "Hey, Katie, how come we

Automobile air conditioning is another victim of turn of the century energy shortages, but he is dressed lightly enough in new cotton chinos from J. C. Penney and a knit polo shirt. Despite the heat of the San Joaquin Valley, he is elated by freedom from movement controls, driving a car without zone restrictions painted in foot-high letters. To be out of hometime is the ultimate liberation. Dealing with consequences for others, he can ignore anything consequential in his own affairs. Love and money are elsewhere; he hums a ditty that once delighted him in a gas-lit Barbary Coast music hall:

Wait 'til the sun shines, Nellie...

The man Chavez is on his way to intercept will drive up into the foothills from Modesto in his Rainbo Baking Company van, making stops in Campo Seco, Paloma, and Rich Gulch before arriving around noon at the 7-Eleven store that by 2002 is the sole enterprise in Bundy's Bar. There the driver, a beefy 26-year-old named Earl Kinderman, will unload a tray of baked goods and then, as best he can recall or the District Attorney's experts can dig out of him during his chemically-enhanced interrogation 34 years later, he will buy a sandwich and a gradeable of soda and sit on a bench outside the store to eat.

And he will meet and fall in love with a young woman named Estelle Marie Evans, herself in Bundy's Bar for the first time, visiting with a cousin. Six months after their marriage in October of 2002, which takes place 37 weeks after their initial meeting, Estelle will bear Earl's only child, a boy named James Evans Kinderman, and then she will die in August 2004 from uterine cancer. Shattered, Kinderman will abandon his son and lapse into a lifetime of alcohol. The boy will fail to respond to the sporadic affection of foster homes and fail at all but one series of undertakings as an adult.

On March 12, 2037, 34-year-old Jimmy Kinderman is convicted of the rape-murders of nine women in and around Los Angeles County over the 23 months prior to his arrest in December the year before. But as expected, Kinderman's lawyer successfully argues "M'Naghten II," diminished capacity due to genetic impairment, and the court orders Kinderman confined in the penal medical facility at Vacaville, where the cost of his support for the rest of his life—estimated at about \$3.5 million in '37 dollars—will be borne by the California taxpayers. But the court and the taxpayers know there are other solutions, which is why the TPA—the Temporal Protection Act of 2037—breezes through Congress in April.

"LET'S FACE IT," SAYS ARNEEZ JEFFERSON, Chavez Salvors' third partner, "it's guys like Kinderman who you can't hang the death penalty on that'll get us the TPA."

The partners sit drinking Anchor Steam in Jefferson's disheveled Slausen Avenue bachelor squat and watch CNN's coverage of the TPA debate in Congress. As company secretary, politician, fixer, and all-around front man, Jefferson knows whereof he speaks.

Twomey says: "I remember reading that when the people at Lawrence-Livermore documented genetic impairment back in 2005, old Sandra Day O'Connor asked, 'how can the law force such criminals to expiate their genes?'"

"A death sentence is too much and a life term's too little," says Chavez. He takes a pull on his gradeable of ale. "If they pass that preemption part—what is it, Title Eight?—we are out of the artifact business and into...." He hesitates for lack of a word.

"Assassin prevention?" suggests Jefferson.

"Preemptive assassination?" suggests Twomey.

"Whatever," says Chavez. "It should be a whole new ball game for us. And interesting."

And so in July, when the TPA becomes law, Chavez Temporal Salvors bids for and in August wins the contract for Kinderman's preemption, the first temporal penetration for that purpose authorized under Section 18 of Title Eight of the TPA. By September, Jefferson has filed the Consequential Impact Report with the Commission on Temporal Adjustment, and the firm begins preparing for the operation amidst a flood of publicity sparked by Kinderman's gory crimes and an American Civil Liberties Union suit against the Commission arguing that preemption is the ultimate invasion of privacy.

"What a lotta crap!" Jefferson says of the ACLU argument when it appears in the faxes and the on-lines. "They talk about privacy, they ought to see what we go through on post-transport!"

Chavez doesn't know where that "we" has come from but he doesn't resent it. "You tell 'em, Arneez," he says.

"Well, I will, Rigo."

In his letter to the *Los Angeles Times*, Jefferson writes:

"Critics of temporal intervention should understand the risks involved. Imagine finding yourself in some target time, emerging from the transporter shell unclothed, with little immunity for whatever diseases are current, with no resources other than what you can carry in your mouth or some other orifice within your corporeal aura, and a delicate temporal adjustment to make within a rigid time span measured in tens of hours. All this without attracting the attention of contemporals and without precipitating what the CTA considers a 'temporally defining moment' with all of its consequences."

"Chavez Salvors is one of only three such firms licensed by the CTA in the western United States. Surely it is time to turn this amazing technology away from the mere recovery of 'lost' art objects to active intervention in the past to solve some of today's most pressing ills."

IN LATE SEPTEMBER, JUST BEFORE the preemption penetration, Chavez lectures to a microhistory class at the University of Southern California's Institute for Temporal Studies. "Once you've made the post-transport adjustment and gotten some operating money, you go for the simplest procurement or—in the Kinderman case we have coming up—*preemptive* tactic first, what in the trade is known as a 'first nail' strategy. You know, Ben Franklin's 'For want of a nail the shoe was lost,' right on up to 'the kingdom was lost....'"

The kingdom Chavez intends to lose is Jimmy Kinderman; the first nail is his father's transportation to meet the woman who will become his mother. Theory: no meeting, no Jimmy Kinderman. And so Chavez waits in his hot little Ford outside the Safeway in Campo Seco, and when the Rainbo Bakery van appears and its driver enters the store with a tray of bread on his shoulder, Chavez employs state-of-the-art 2037 technology by creeping around to the street side of the van, hammer in hand, and driving two tenpenny nails into the left front tire.

First and *second* nail, he thinks.

He retreats to the Ford and watches as the delivery man returns to his wounded van, surveys the flat tire, and shakes his head in frustration. Chavez gets a good look at him and joins him in head shaking. No way is this middle-aged black man Earl Kinderman. Chavez leaves his car, strolls past, stops, and sympathizes. "Got a flat?"

The driver gives Chavez a pained look. "Shit no, man. I keep this tire low so's the van slants and I can get around these mountain

"Kinderman?"

He looks up from the tire with a curious eye. "What you want, man? Can I do somethin' for you?"

"You said Kinderman. I'm looking for a guy named Kinderman."

"Company send you?"

Chavez thinks fast. "Yeah, but there's no problem. I'm supposed to do a field check on his brakes and safety stuff. Highway Patrol is doing it and passing out big fines, so Rainbo hired us to do the same thing, only first."

The black man nods. "Makes sense. Well, this here ain't Kinderman's van. It's just the bottom chunk of Kinderman's route, the lucky sombitch, and I caught the damn nails he shoulda caught. Fuckin' lucky Kinderman. You know what I'm sayin'?" He straightens from his inspection of the tire and peers up into the foothills. "You wanna catch Kinderman's van, he took my delivery in San Andreas. You catch up with him somewhere between there and maybe Rich Gulch."

Temporal momentum, thinks Chavez as he starts the drive up into the hot foothills. No surprise. The tendency for events to maintain their thrust, to somehow improvise a missing nail so that no kingdom will be lost, is powerful, its presence and influence always to be anticipated during a penetration. As he drives he notes his lack of progress on the chipcorder that accompanies him every-time, in his hand or in a pocket during target time, elsewhere in his body under transport.

AN HOUR LATER HE DRIVES through Bundy's Bar and pulls off the road into a dusty patch of chaparral a dozen yards beyond the 7-Eleven. It is not quite noon, and no Rainbo van is in sight as he walks in 100 degree heat back to the convenience store. His feet hurt, reminding him that for all their technological ingenuity, previous generations never figured out how to make a truly comfortable shoe.

From the blaze of a June noon to the shade of a verandah to the dim interior of the store and the sudden, moist cool of evaporative air conditioning, Chavez enters into the smell of lunch meat and coffee and gasoline and overripe fruit and a hint of perfume. The only illumination comes from the entrance door, the dirty front windows, and a row of lighted cold cases set on gummy vinyl floor tiles along the rear wall.

The girl who has to be Estelle Evans is there; Kinderman's memory has been accurate. She stands next to a magazine rack, looking through an old magazine called *People*. Chavez recognizes her from the wedding picture Earl Kinderman has given the DA. She is pretty in a colorless way, her hair and makeup and blue dress all just a little wrong for her. But Chavez abandons this cold appraisal as he remembers that she is only 20, is within nine months of maternity, is a year and a half away from her death. And then as he looks more closely at her in the dim light, he sees the vulnerability in her and—surprising him—the remarkable beauty hidden beneath the bad makeup and teased hair. And something else: a look of quiet self-assurance that reminds him a little of Kate. A country girl, perhaps, but no simpleton.

He takes a gradeable of something from a cold case, hands a bill to the wrinkled old lady behind the counter, and walks over to the young woman. "You live around here?" he says.

"No, just visiting." Her response is carefully neutral. She does not

look up from her magazine.

"Well, OK." Chavez picks one of the new audiomags off the rack and thumbs its sampler. Over its tinny sound, he says: "Maybe you can tell me the way to Rich Gulch. I'm new around here and I guess I'm lost."

Her answer is quiet but dismissive. "You had to go through Rich Gulch to get here. You can just turn around and go back down the hill."

"OK, but I still might get lost. How's about going with me to show me the way?" Chavez tries his most illuminating smile. He has not been unsuccessful with women. He has prevailed more often than not at random encounters. He is not without experience and feels some confidence in his looks and his ability to attract women, particularly one who he knows is about to be picked up by another stranger. Someone entering the store brings a surge of daylight through the door; Estelle's beauty blooms; Chavez' feigned attraction becomes just a little real.

He has neither her attention nor her interest. "Please," she says in a low voice, turning her back to him and fixing her gaze on her magazine. He circles her to face her again, resting his arm on an upper tier of the magazine rack and lowering his head to peer more directly into her face.

"Hey, come on," he says. "I just want to—" As he leans closer, the combination of his strained posture and early 21st century footgear does its worst. He stumbles and lurches into Estelle Evans, his hand brushing across her right breast.

"Jeez! What are you doing?" she says.

"Excuse me, I—" Chavez jerks his hand back and starts an apology. A fiberglass tray loaded with hamburger buns slides before his eyes and docks into the top tier of the rack, interposed between him and the girl in a flurry of spilled paperbacks and baked goods.

"You OK, miss?" says Earl Kinderman, ignoring Chavez, the bread, and the literature.

"Aw shit, Earl!" says the wrinkled old lady behind the cash register. "Why'd ya have to bust my magazine rack?"

IGNORED BY THE YOUNG MAN AND WOMAN now gazing fixedly at each other, Chavez tosses some bills on the counter to placate the old lady and slips out the door and back to his little Ford where he sits, hidden from the 7-Eleven by thick brush, through much of the long, hot afternoon. He dictates an account of his second failure into the chipcorder and supplements it with air and soil samples to validate his presence in that time and place. There is always a chance that the slight temporal perturbation his mere presence has so far introduced will do the trick, although it is unlikely.

The Rainbo van does not move. For a while Kinderman and Estelle Evans sit together on a bench on the verandah, talking animatedly, and Chavez enhances his temporal log with half a microdisk of video, shot with a cheap drugstore Sony. They reenter the store holding hands and emerge half an hour later and go to Kinderman's van, laughing, Evan's arms full of groceries. They pause for a long kiss and then Kinderman helps his soon-to-be lover into the van and it starts off down the road toward Rich Gulch. Chavez switches on the Ford and follows, staying well back, keeping track of the van from the tawny dust it raises.

He has studied the District Attorney's interrogation tapes. By 2036 the elder Kinderman is a wreck of a man, but through the haze of booze comes details of what must be the happiest weeks in his life when, young and in love, he fathers a child and foresees nothing of the evils to come. Chavez remembers one of his words, uttered over and over again, "Instantaneous. You talk about love at first sight? It was just plain instantaneous, me and Estelle. Pretty near cost me my job, that first day. Lucky it was my last stop. Just plain instantaneous!"

Chavez, reading the transcripts, wondered what it would be like

to fall so suddenly, so completely in love. What love he has found has been cautious, tentative, inconsequential, anything but "instantaneous." Are he and the young Kinderman so different? Is it just the third of a century that distances them?

Less than a mile from Bundy's Bar, the Rainbo van pulls into a dirt drive leading to a battered doublewide mobile home. There is a shabby vinyl swingset, a disemboweled television, a hoodless Camaro, and a battered aluminum bass boat strapped to a trailer on blocks. Chavez pulls over into another stand of manzanita, shoots more video, and sits through the gathering dusk, watching the doublewide as blue smoke and the odor of fried chicken emanates from a louvered stack. And then lights come on and then lights go off.

There is no driveable vehicle other than the Rainbo van, which means that Estelle Evans' cousin and family are elsewhere, that she and Kinderman have the place to themselves, and that—in all likelihood—what Chavez has traveled across 35 years, two months, and 25 days to prevent (the chronometer in the transporter read 308.664khr 23min 54sec) is even now happening. His feeling of helplessness is accompanied by—the thought comes reluctantly—*envy*. How can he envy a couple about to breed a monster? A nice young guy about to tumble into a lifetime of unhappiness? A bright young woman about to die?

After a while it comes to him. They are making love, making a baby, and that is doing something...*consequential*. And his romantic soul wishes for that.

Chavez updates his chipcorder log again and then sits tired and hungry to ponder his situation. While the minor perturbation he has induced into the timestream has clearly not preempted the lovers' contact or consummation, it is still possible that it might alter the circumstantial context of James Evans Kinderman's conception. Perhaps some other sperm carrying undamaged genetic material will score, some slightly different James Evans Kinderman will come into the world. But once again there is the momentum of time, the tendency for kingdoms—good or evil—to survive almost any lost nail.

A greater perturbation? Half a decade earlier he might have done something with the panic over AIDS, but that horror is gone. Force? Chavez is not a violent man but he can think of nothing short of violence that will interrupt the biological drama he is sure is being produced, probably in several acts, as he sits, his stomach rumbling and his mental clock ticking toward the transporter reset time now less than 20 hours away. If violence, what? Attack the pair? Kinderman has 10 years and 20 pounds on him, and probably—Chavez thinks wryly—his shoes fit him better. No, if he has to get violent it will have to be with Estelle alone, after Kinderman has left. Chavez doesn't like the idea. Even in a remote area where the chances of producing what the TPA would consider a temporally defining event are greatly diminished by a lack of witnesses, a violent perturbation is dangerous. And then there is his own nature. Can he coldly inflict injury on an innocent? He has seen his share of bloodshed, along the Liffey and then in Sligo Bay, but he was younger then, and thoughtless.

HE DECIDES. THERE IS NO REAL ALTERNATIVE. The risk is worth the gain: nine, maybe 10 women's lives and—why be hypocritical?—the salvation of Chavez Salvors. He switches the Ford on and drives back to Bundy's Bar and the 7-Eleven, still open for business at nearly midnight. To his relief, the old lady behind the cash register has been replaced by a young Latino, who smirks at Chavez' purchase of two corn dogs and a gradeable of Pepsi, a package of three steel barbecue skewers, a bottle of isopropyl alcohol, and a package of three Midnight Delight condoms ("Ribbed and Textured for Her Thrill...And Yours!").

The plan is as simple as the purchases. He will wait until Evans

is again alone, manhandle her into passivity, and then, before she knows what is happening, insert a sterile needle just above her pelvic bone and into her abdomen in the general direction of the uterus. The alcohol is to sterilize the skewer; the condom to keep it that way up to the moment of insertion. The risk is the obvious danger to Evans, that he might nick the bladder or that despite his precautions such amateur surgery will produce a serious infection. But the potential payoff is great for everyone: Evans will surely seek medical attention; any halfway decent physician will do a routine pap smear; the fatal uterine cancer whose growth would otherwise be masked by her pregnancy will show up, and the resulting hysterectomy will be the final nail in the prenatal coffin of James Evans Kinderman.

Can he do it? Can he *not* do it? Chavez watches the dark and silent doublewide through the long night. He wishes he could turn on the car radio, anything to lessen the turmoil in his mind. He particularly savors the music of the eras he has penetrated: the Beatles during the failed Spassky souvenirs operation; the songs from *Pal Joey* in the Coconut Grove fire. Best of all was the week in San Francisco in April 1906, setting up for those hours between earthquake and fire and the successful retrieval of the lost Whistlers. Post-transport adjustment is tough in eras before you could knock over pay phones and vending machines for starter money. But he'd done well in 1906. *After the Ball* had been on everyone's lips and in the first of the coin-operated player pianos.

But there can be no music now to soothe his savage thoughts. Can he do it? She will die anyway. And what are the consequences? The risk is not all that great. Sometimes brute force is all that is left. He doesn't know.

HE SLEEPS AND WAKES TO the sound of the Rainbo van's engine. It is first light and he can hear soft murmurs, a tinkling laugh, a deeper voice saying—suddenly very clearly—"instantaneous," and "tonight," and then the slam of the van door. Chavez waits in the hushed dawn for Evans to return to sleep. After half an hour, he silently exits the Ford, relieves himself of the Pepsi, and—abandoning his ill-fitting shoes—pads on stocking feet across matted pine needles to the dark doublewide.

The door is unlocked, and within seconds he is standing in dim light at a rumpled double bed, in the near side of which Evans lies on her back, once again deep in sleep, her dark hair splayed across a pillow, her blue nylon nightgown snug across her hips. The room has the close, musky smell of perfume and perspiration. A squirrel chitters someplace to the rear; a thrush whistles softly outside the gray square of the window. Chavez draws the condom-wrapped skewer from his hip pocket and kneels beside the bed. Evans sighs deeply and resumes her deep, regular breathing. Chavez poises the skewer's point, stretching at the latex of the condom, just above her pubic arch, cleanly outlined in the snug nylon. One quick, short thrust, minimum risk, and he will be out of there.

But he cannot do it. He kneels there until his back aches, and then he stands, knowing something about himself he has not known before, knowing that he will have to gamble on his deepest and perhaps most romantic belief: that the appeal of reason has to be, in the end, universal, that there must be some choice for Estelle as for himself, Kate, and human beings everywhere, or at least he will

have to try that appeal to good sense before surrendering to brutality, or else the inconsequential world he has inherited will always, for him, remain that way.

HE RETRIEVES A DRESSING TABLE CHAIR and returns to sit at the bedside. Quietly, then insistently, he calls Evans' name, holding the skewer at her throat, holding it loosely so that should she be startled, she will not hurt herself.

"Estelle," he says quietly, in a conversational tone. "Estelle, wake up."

Her eyes open. He presses his left hand across her mouth and says, "Don't scream. It's OK."

She is instantly awake, instantly aware of the sharp pressure beneath her chin. She nods and he removes his hand. "Oh God! Who are you? You're the guy from the 7-Eleven!"

"Don't make noise," he says. Then nothing more for a moment, let her get over the initial shock. Let the terror build in her. "I don't think I will have to hurt you if you keep calm and think about what I have to say."

"You want money? I got...."

"No. And I'm not going to rape you. I want you to lie there and listen."

She nods, her eyes filling with tears. The calm good sense he has seen in her takes control. She is frightened but not panicked.

Chavez pulls the skewer back from its pressure on her throat. Despite his care there is a spot of blood. "What I have to say to you isn't going to make much sense, but I want you to listen and look at me and understand that I am telling you the truth and that if we are lucky we will all come out of this OK."

"All? I don't understand...."

"Just listen. I have this friend who is a terrific guy, a doctor with a family practice who works 12 hours a day looking after anyone who comes to him whether they can pay or not. He works his ass off and neglects his own health and the only thing he does for relaxation is go out to this little rinky-dink country club every Wednesday afternoon, play two, three holes of golf, which he kind of hates, and then sit in the clubhouse and get real drunk."

Evans closes her eyes and shakes her head back and forth. What is this man talking about? "Oh God," she says. "What do you want?"

Chavez ignores her. "Well, once when he came home from the club drunk, he put his car in the garage and propped himself up against the overhead door guide rails as the door came down, and it mashed the ends of three fingers on his left hand. He wrapped his hand in a handkerchief, drove himself to the hospital, found a colleague to X-ray his hand and sew him up, and when the other doctor said, 'how long's it been since you had a chest shot?' my guy said, 'shit, I don't know.' And so they did a chest X-ray and found a tumor the size of a hen's egg and took it out the next day, and he is still alive and well and working 80 hours a week and grateful that he is not a left-handed surgeon."

All this perplexes but calms Evans. "You can take away the needle or whatever it is. I won't scream. But please, what do you want?"

"I came here to stab you, to punch that needle you feel under your chin into your uterus...."

"What?" Terror returns to Evans' eyes.

"Just listen. The idea was that if I did that you'd go to see a doctor and he would fix you up all right but in the process he would do a pap smear and find the cancer that will kill you in about a year, just like my friend with the bad left hand."

"This is crazy. I don't have any cancer. Why would I go...."

Chavez leans over her, his face close to hers, his eyes burning with intensity. "Listen to me," he says in a hard, quiet voice close to breaking. "I know a whole lot about you. You are Estelle Marie

Evans. Your mother was born Maria Ruiz. Your father died in June 1993, when you were 11 years old. His name was Lewis Evans. You graduated from Visalia High School last year and you clerk in a K-Mart and you are studying part time to become a paralegal at the College of the Sequoias. You will marry Earl Kinderman and if you are lucky, you will live a long and happy life with him. If you are unlucky, you will die next year of uterine cancer. If I am lucky, you will listen to me and not worry too much about understanding all this. You will look me in the eye and understand that I think I am in love with someone a lot like you, someone who is full of great good sense like I think you are, and if she were in your fix, I would want someone like me to come and warn her of the consequences. I would want her to look in that someone's eyes and say to herself, OK, I don't understand what this asshole is talking about, but I'll listen and maybe I'll do what he says."

Chavez pauses. Outside the squirrel says something to the thrush. He feels a sudden new sureness and commitment. "She would think ...my lady would, ah to hell with it... I'll trust this guy, because he could have hurt me and he didn't. He reasoned with me."

He is silent again. She stares at him for a long moment, transfixed. And then he leans forward even farther and softly, gently, kisses her on the forehead.

He rises from the chair then and flings the skewer rattling into a corner. "Now scream and carry on if you want," he says, not particularly addressing her. "I've done my goddamnedest!"

Estelle Evans sits up, a flush of relief in her face at the sound of the needle hitting the wall. "Wait!" she says.

But Chavez is out the door and running on sore feet toward his Ford.

HE HAS CUT IT CLOSE, BUT he makes his flight from San Francisco to Los Angeles and spends his last \$100 bill on cab fare to the new Orange County Landfill off Harbor Boulevard. Now surplus, his J. C. Penney clothes join the rich assortment of rags from which he had selected his initial get-started wardrobe only half a hundred or so hours earlier. And then he is down through a new layer of newspapers and compacted garbage and into the transporter shell with nearly an hour to spare and back in the 2037 plastihut ops center in quite literally no time at all.

"Everything OK, Rigo?" says Arneez Jefferson as Chavez levers himself up out of the shell into which Jefferson has just helped him climb. Kate Twomey is busy at the back of the room, reading print-outs and thumbing switches.

Chavez spits a video microdisk into one hand. "Don't know," he says, grimacing as he bends at the waist, reaches behind, and pops the chipcorder into his other hand. "What's your take?"

"We haven't got a clue, man!" says Jefferson joyfully. "Not the least fucking idea of what you been up to for the last nanosecond or two." His voice breaks with excitement. "All's we know is that we got paid \$1.6 mil by the corrections people for a preemption, but no idea who you must have—hot damn!—preempted."

"Ah, no news is good news," says Chavez, wrapping himself in a terry robe and beginning to hum the tune to *After the Ball*. He grows silent for a moment, aware that Jefferson is eyeing him, seeing something new in his face.

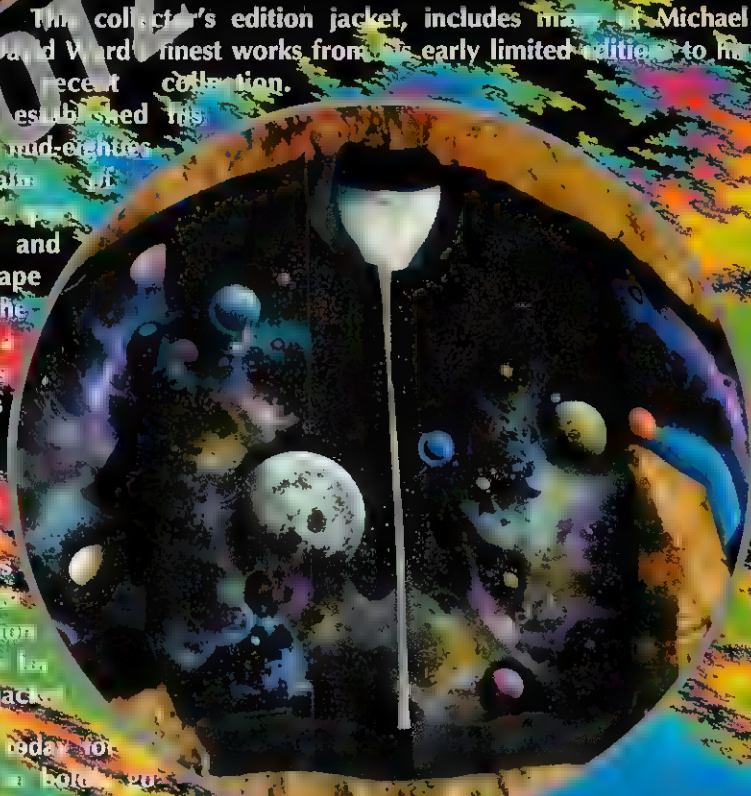
"Katie?" Chavez says, walking to the back of the plastihut. "How's about dinner tonight? I got something of consequence I want to talk to you about." □

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Given a choice between losing your hand or losing your life, would you have the nerve to make the right decision?

EMBRACING THE ARMS SHE MUST BEAR

BY RESA NELSON

Illustration by Tom Simonton

LYNN SAT AT A WINDOW TABLE IN A JAPANESE NOODLE RESTAURANT IN CAMBRIDGE. HER friends Amy and Evan sat across the table from her, chattering happily. Lynn pressed her hands against a gray ceramic teacup to warm them. The brightly-colored banners hanging from the lampposts in the courtyard outside flapped sharply in the wind. A short Italian man and a woman wearing a short, flouncy sum-

mer dress and white high heels walked past Lynn. The woman's dark red hair was tied back in a pony tail with a white chiffon ribbon.

Outside, a car backfired. The woman with the red pony tail spun around to face the noise. As she turned, she threw her glove on the floor, and it landed near Lynn's feet.

"Excuse me," Lynn said to her, reaching down to the floor. Lynn sat up again, frowning, looking at what the woman had dropped.

At first Lynn thought it was a latex glove, like the kind for washing dishes. But it was a pale beige color and looked like real skin, with pores and starlike wrinkles along the knuckles, and pale pink nails on top of the fingertips. As she looked at the glove more carefully, Lynn realized that the fingers were webbed together, not separated. It was more like a mitten than a glove.

Lynn felt chilled, wishing she'd left the glove on the floor.

When she looked up, Lynn saw the gun in the woman's hand, as she stood in a firing stance.

The woman gazed around quickly, her every look like a camera shutter clicking.

All the time, Lynn stared at the gun in the woman's hand. It was unlike anything Lynn had ever seen before—it was the same olive color and complexion of the woman's skin. In fact, Lynn couldn't tell where the woman's wrist ended and the gun began.

Then Lynn realized that the woman with the red pony tail wasn't holding a gun in her hand—the gun was one of her hands.

It was a pistol that was all barrel and no grip. There wasn't even a visible trigger. Lynn had read somewhere that the trigger was neurological, wired to an implanted chip that boosted the adrenaline system. The result was an illusion of time slowing down.

Everyone in the restaurant stared at the woman with the red pony tail, and they seemed to collectively hold their breath.

"It's OK," the woman's companion said to her softly. "It was just a car backfiring."

She remained in her firing stance for a moment, as if to be sure. Then she relaxed, letting her arms drop to her side.

A woman in a black suit hurried toward them. "I'm the manager," she said. "Is everything all right?"

"Police officer," the woman with the red pony tail said, businesslike. She reached into a pocket with her real hand, pulled out a wallet, and flipped it open to show a badge. "Sorry—false alarm."

The manager beamed, relaxing. "No problem. We're happy to have you here." The manager paused, waving a waiter away. "In fact, let me show you to one of our best tables myself."

As her companion slipped his arm around her waist, the woman with the red pony tail glanced about as if she'd lost something.

Her gaze locked on Lynn, and Lynn breathed in sharply, before she could help herself.

"Thanks," the woman said under her breath as she took the skinlike glove from Lynn and sheathed her gunhand with it. She and her companion walked away, following the manager through the restaurant.

"Wow!" Amy said under her breath, delighted. "I've seen gunhands on TV, but they're so chilling in person!"

"Yeah," Lynn said quietly, looking down at her chopsticks resting on the table, still sheathed in a paper holder.



"I'm so glad she's here. And that she's sitting so close to us. It's probably the safest place to eat in town right now!" Amy brushed her hair back away from her face.

Lynn looked up at her. Amy was wearing that horrible blue eyeshadow again that made her look like a 12-year-old who didn't know how to wear makeup

yet. It was the only thing that Lynn really disliked about her, and right now Lynn hated it.

Evan shook his head. "I never thought I'd see the day when a woman would sacrifice her hand for the sake of a gun."

Amy put her arm around his shoulder and squeezed him gently. "I'll never give up any of my body parts as long as I have you to protect me," she said flirtatiously.

"You couldn't anyway," Lynn said, taking out her chopsticks and breaking them apart.

"Not anymore," Amy said lightly. "It's not just lady cops who can get gunhands."

"What?" Lynn said.

"Oh, honey, please, not again," Evan said to Amy. He squished his face up in mock squeamishness.

"I just heard there's a new ruling," Amy said, rolling her eyes at Evan's protest. "If you're a woman and you're not a cop, all you have to do is take a psych profile test, and you can trade in your hand for a gun."

"Oh, Amy, no no no," Evan said, playfully putting his hands over his ears. "It's too disgusting."

"I know, Honey," Amy said, grinning. "It's my night to gross *you* out." She winked at Lynn. "We take turns."

Evan closed his eyes and pressed his hands tighter against his ears. "La la la, I'm not hearing you," he sang, making his best grossed-out face.

"I'm almost afraid to ask," Lynn said tentatively, "but why should anyone give up a perfectly good hand?"

"Oh, they keep your hand and ice it," Amy said cheerfully. "Then if you change your mind some day, they can reattach it."

"Yuck!" Lynn squealed, mimicking Evan by putting her hands over her ears.

The waitress arrived with a trayful of large ceramic bowls of udon noodle soup.

"Zat's my girl," Evan said in his best fake French accent. "Ze queen of dinner conversation."

"I'm sorry," Amy said, her forehead creasing in worry lines as she frowned. "I thought you'd like to know, just in case...."

"It's OK," Lynn said, suppressing a shudder. "It's good to know about, but I'd rather *die* than get one of those things."

Amy and Evan exchanged worried glances. "Well, you're safe tonight," Evan said. "Not only will we drive you home, but we'll walk you to the door. Right, Amy?"

"Mmm," Amy said, slurping her noodle soup. "Evan's a great bodyguard—he protects me from the bad guys." She winked at Lynn. "And I'm glad to share him."

Lynn looked at them wistfully. This was Lynn's first night out since one of her friends had been murdered three months ago. Like most people, Lynn took plenty of precautions during the day. At night, of course, it was worse—it wasn't safe to go anywhere unless you had a bodyguard or you were armed. It was nice to have just one night where she didn't feel like a shut-in.

Lynn smiled, slurping her udon noodle soup in a vain attempt to out-slurp Amy.

Lynn thought of Paul waiting at home for her. He'd be so proud of Lynn for being brave enough to go out to dinner at night with her friends.

It felt good to be out in the world again.

The next day, Lynn breezed into work at the Atlantis Ad Agency right on time. The one good thing about rush-hour traffic was

safety in numbers.

Lynn grabbed a can of Diet Coke from the kitchen and chugged it to get her early-morning caffeine rush. She set her briefcase on top of her desk and unfolded it. The briefcase was actually a portable multi-unit display of flat, lightweight screens. Completely unfolded, it was a matrix three screens high by five screens wide, and Lynn hooked the outermost screens onto the Pendaflex frame suspended above her desk.

She plugged the display into the power strip built into her desktop and logged onto the network. Each screen came to life, displaying vids and movies. Lynn's current project was funded by the Tice Fund.

The friends and family of Wilhelmina Tice believed the media had something to do with the fact that Wilhelmina was murdered by her boyfriend when he found out she was stripping in the Combat Zone. She'd been stripping to research her master's thesis in Women's Studies at Harvard. The Tice Fund was committed to spotlighting the epidemic of violence against women, usually caused by their jealous husbands or boyfriends.

On one hand, Lynn sympathized with them. It hadn't been that long since she had learned the hard way what it felt like when someone she cared about

was murdered. It gave her a sense of kinship with the people behind the Tice Fund, and she wanted to do a good job for them.

On the other hand, Lynn believed that was only one part of the picture. It wasn't just women who were dying.

Lynn slipped on her RealFeel headband. It was half an inch wide, and the top side was covered with gathered red cotton material, making it look like a regular headband. The underside was smooth black plastic and had tiny thumbwheel controls. She turned the intensity on Low, and ran through a quick spot-check of virtual feelings. On one of the center screens in the matrix, she ran a 15-second tape, testing the major emotions ranging from Joy to Terror. Lynn hit the pause button when she got to Grief—the feeling was still fading out, just like yesterday.

Pursing her lips, she took off the headband, flipped open the control panel, and wiggled one of the pinhead chips in a little tighter with her fingernail. She reassembled the headband, put it back on, and replayed Grief.

Sadness washed over her and dragged back out again like an undertow. Lynn stopped the test tape. "That's it," she said softly. "Right on the money."

Lynn zipped through old vids and movies, looking for the images she thought had the power to make people watch, if only for a tenth of a second. She had been given a total of two minutes and 15 seconds air time by the board of trustees of the Wilhelmina Tice Memorial Fund, and she wanted to make every second count.

Even though she had mixed feelings about the goals of the Tice Fund, Lynn cared about her work as a vid artist. If nothing else, Lynn figured, the Tice project would make a nice portfolio piece. All things considered, Lynn felt lucky her boss had assigned the project to her.

Finally, an old movie caught her eye.

SIGHT BYTE: A young woman, naive and fresh out of college rides the subway. The man next to her drops the centerfold out of a pornographic magazine.

SOUND BYTE: The young woman gasps.

SIGHT BYTE: New scene: the same woman is somewhat older now, and has a seasoned look about her. An attractive man is in her apartment, in her bed, wearing only a pair of jeans. He suddenly pulls a switchblade out of his pocket. He jumps off the foot of the bed and strikes several poses, as if imitating a martial artist. He brandishes the knife.

SOUND BYTE: He talks but makes no sense. She desperately tries to convince him to leave.

SIGHT BYTE: New scene: a different boyfriend, a moment of pas-

sion. A condom falls on the floor. He moves away from her. The woman clutches her stomach, doubled over in bed.

SOUND BYTE: She is laughing, making fun of the condom. His voice sounds humiliated and strained. Suddenly, he looks dangerous, mentally disturbed.

Lynn pressed her lips together, annoyed. Each time a new boyfriend was introduced, the RealFeel headband gave her a jolt of excitement and longing. But sooner or later, that gave way to a sense of dread. Even with this last boyfriend. He'd seemed so nice and normal until the woman made fun of the condom. All of a sudden he looked more like Mr. Psycho than Mr. Nice Guy.

"It's not fair," Lynn murmured as she kept watching, hoping the movie would get better. It was unrealistic to portray all men as potentially dangerous.

At the same time, Lynn realized, it hit a little too close to home. Sometimes, she thought, you don't know whom to trust until it's too late.

SIGHT BYTE: New scene: the first boyfriend forces her apartment door ajar, but the chain lock holds it in place. He pulls out his switchblade and pries at the chain.

SOUND BYTE: He mutters obscenities, angrily. The harsh clank of metal against metal.

SIGHT BYTE: New scene: the still-action effect caused by a stroboscope: yet another new boyfriend forcing her down on the bed. Her mouth is stretched open wide, and she struggles. He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a knife.

SOUND BYTE: Loud music, but you can still hear her scream underneath it.

Although her heart was pounding and a light sheen of sweat covered her forehead, Lynn knew it wasn't what she wanted. She sighed, deleting that movie and searching for another one.

As the 15 different vids and movies competed for her attention, the opening titles of one caught her eye.

No, it's not even the titles, Lynn thought. It's the studio logo.

SIGHT BYTE: Background: The studio name in giant yellow letters against bright blue thunderheads.

Foreground: The logo is of a beautiful woman holding a torch high above her head, like the Statue of Liberty. Her dark hair is pinned up, and she wears a long, virgin-white gown with a purple sash draped between her breasts. The picture of the woman changes to a cartoon character, and she looks around and tosses off the purple wrap and long white gown.

SOUND BYTE: The beginning chords of lively, honky-tonk piano music.

SIGHT BYTE: Same scene: Underneath the long white gown, the cartoon woman is wearing jeans and a red shirt. A black cowboy hat lands on her head, as she draws both guns from their holsters and begins shooting wildly in all directions.

SOUND BYTE: Banjos join the honky-tonk piano, and the voices of two men sing an upbeat ballad.

"I know this movie," Lynn murmured, noting that she now felt light-hearted and cheerful. She keyed in a command to fast-forward until she gave a vocal command to stop and play.

SIGHT BYTE: A matronly woman leads a young girl down the aisle of a train traveling through the Western frontier.

SOUND BYTE: "Here you stand, Catherine, on the threshold of life. You have graduated from my academy with a first-rate education...."

SIGHT BYTE: New scene: The young woman (they call her "Cat") collapses at her father's body after he is shot, then looks up in surprise at the three men surrounding them—the three men she asked to protect her father. She chases the gunman as he rides away.

Cat confronts the gunman and the sheriff, who gives him an alibi. They treat her like a child.

SOUND BYTE: She says, "So that's the way it's going to be." Cat goes for the gunman's throat, and it takes several men to pull her off. She grabs someone's gun and starts shooting—the ring of bullets hit the bell tower. Glass shatters as the sheriff's window is shot out.

SIGHT BYTE: They take the gun away from her. Cat stands straight and looks them in the eye.

SOUND BYTE: "You won't make me cry," she says. "You'll never make me cry."

"Oh, brother," Lynn murmured. "What a dopey thing to say."

She scrutinized various scenes, liking the irony of a young woman who turned to crime as a way of avenging her father's murder. "I know how you feel," Lynn said softly.

Lynn paused, freezing the scene. It had been so many years since she'd seen this movie that Lynn had forgotten about a turn in the plot. It took her by surprise.

SIGHT BYTE: New scene: Cat confronts an older man, the man behind her father's murder. She holds a gun. He grabs her hand, the one holding the gun, and they struggle.

SOUND BYTE: A single gunshot. Lynn sat down for a moment, feeling dizzy. She pulled the RealFeel band from her head, letting it fall to the floor.

She took a deep breath, leaned forward, and put her head between her knees. Her hands shook as she wrapped her arms around her legs, keeping her head down and breathing slow.

For a moment, Lynn had been so engrossed that she felt as if she were Cat Ballou.

It had seemed so real. She could feel the gun in her hand, and his hand on hers, and the surprise of the gun going off, killing him.

Lynn breathed slowly and deeply, fighting nausea.

The most horrible part was how *good* it felt, even now, to kill the murderer of someone she cared about.

As Lynn drove home from work that night, she remembered that she hadn't picked up the clothes she'd left at the dry cleaners last week. She found a parking space just a few doors down from the cleaners. It was late in the day, nearly dusk, and Lynn rushed to get out of the car and lock it. Hurriedly, she pulled the KattleProd from her purse and strapped it loosely around her wrist.

A few minutes later, she walked out of the cleaners, carrying two long dresses over one arm.

Someone grabbed her by the hand, the one wearing the KattleProd.

Lynn spun around, and looked into the eyes of a 12-year-old kid, his pupils so dilated that she thought they were black at first, then saw the faint blue irises surrounding them.

Lynn cried out, staring at the KattleProd, realizing she'd forgotten to turn it on.

He yanked the watch off her other arm. The dresses fell to the sidewalk, the clear plastic dry-cleaning bags billowing like parachutes on the way down.

He grabbed at her purse, but Lynn held on tight. When Lynn resisted, he grabbed the KattleProd, wrenching it off hard.

Lynn looked down at her hand. Already, she could see the darkness of a bruise forming, and the vein along the base of her thumb was throbbing. She looked up to see the red glow at the end of the KattleProd, and the branding letters KP, the company's logo.

He'd turned on the KattleProd. "Give it to me!" he shouted again, and thrust the KattleProd at Lynn's face.

She dropped the purse and flung her arms in front of her face.

The kid picked up her purse and grinned, thrusting the KattleProd at her.

Lynn screamed when she heard her skin sizzle as the KattleProd struck her forearm dead on. The force of the voltage from the KattleProd knocked her to the ground, and she was too stunned to move.

The owner of the dry cleaners came running out of his store with a shotgun. "Hey!" he shouted. "Get out of here!"

Then suddenly the kid was gone, and the owner knelt by Lynn, seeing the burn on her arm. "We've got to get you to a hospital."

After the security guard let her into the building, Lynn rode the elevator up to the 17th floor. At the front door to her apartment, Lynn steadied her

hands against the wall as she faced the retina security scan.

Don't cry, she told herself. Once after a frustrating day at work, Lynn had been teary-eyed when she came home, and it took four tries before the scanner recognized her.

The door clicked open. Lynn sat down at the kitchen table, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. When she looked up, Paul was sitting next to her.

"You were out late," Paul said, smiling. "Did you get together with Amy again?"

"I was at the hospital," Lynn said, showing him her bandaged arm. "I was attacked."

"What happened?" Paul said, stunned.

"Nothing much. I'm OK. They gave me Valium."

Paul pressed his lips together. "What *happened*?"

Lynn paused, realizing how somber Paul had become. It wasn't like him. Even when something awful happened, she could always count on Paul for the light touch. Even when somebody gets killed, Lynn thought, gazing at his face.

Three months ago she'd run into Paul unexpectedly. When she told him how scared and upset she was, he offered to move in. Lynn had been touched—she and Paul had dated only once, and both knew they weren't right for each other. But Lynn had always felt fond of him. It was just like Paul to do something as generous as move in for a short time until Lynn felt comfortable being alone again.

Of course, Paul had joked, "If I'd known you were this easy, I would have moved in long ago!"

Now, feeling woozy and relaxed from the Valium, Lynn looked dreamily into Paul's eyes. "You're such a good friend, Paul."

"Lynn," he said. "Tell me what happened."

Lynn groaned. "I got branded. It serves me right. I forgot to turn the stupid thing on, which I never should have bought in the first place. I mean, who am I to go around branding people as if they were sheep?"

"You mean, cattle," Paul said, frowning. In his most no-nonsense tone, he said, "What *happened*?"

After Lynn explained in detail, Paul shook his head and said, "I wish you'd think about getting a gunhand."

Lynn stared at him in horror. "I can't believe you just said that."

Paul shrugged. "It's hitting too close to home. Nobody's safe anymore, Lynn. You know that."

"No one is safe anymore," Lynn said angrily, "because of guns. God, Paul, you know as well as I do that you can practically pick up a gun at the corner drugstore."

"That's not true."

"Maybe not yet. But it's not far off." Lynn shook her head. "You know how much I hate guns. I can't believe you want me to give up my *hand*."

Paul drummed his fingers on the tabletop, clearly irritated. "What about what happened tonight? What's more important—losing your hand or losing your life?"

Lynn looked down at her bandaged arm. "I learned my lesson tonight. Nothing is foolproof. If I get a gunhand, what's to keep someone from knocking me unconscious and cutting it off?"

Paul forced a smile, but he couldn't hide his irritation when he spoke. "Then why don't you just spend the rest of your life at home?"

"What's wrong with that?" Lynn said, just as irritably.

"It's not you. You're not a homebody. Just look at how miserable

you've been the past three months. All you do is go to work and come home. That's no life, Lynn. That's no life at all."

"I'm not so miserable," Lynn said, quieter now. "You're great company."

Paul sighed and looked away. "Look, Lynn. I've been thinking..."

Please, no, Lynn thought, holding her breath. Paul had been edgy lately, and distracted.

"I think I should be moving on," he said.

"Please, not yet, Paul," Lynn said softly. She knew she didn't have the right to ask him for more. He'd already given far more than she could have hoped for. She wasn't ready to let go of him. "Just a little longer. Will you stay?"

"I'll stay," he said, not smiling, "as long as you need me."

It was what he had always said, from the very beginning. And if there was one thing Lynn had learned about Paul, it was that when he said something, he meant it.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Later that week, Lynn walked into the downtown police station. Inside, the station looked like a high school hallway; the floor was tiled with cheap

linoleum, and the walls were made of pale yellow cinderblocks, making the air feel cool and damp.

The officer at the front desk pointed Lynn to a stairwell, after calling down to make sure an attendant was in the morgue.

The attendant looked like a beauty school dropout, her platinum hair styled two feet high in a replica of the Eiffel Tower. She wore a white lab coat and a black plastic name tag with letters engraved in white: G. McRae. Her metallic gold stilettos clicked precariously on the linoleum floor as she led Lynn down an aisle between file cabinetlike drawers.

Stopping at one, McRae ran a quick pattern of touches across the tiny screen membrane. When the screen display changed, McRae said, "This is the one." She pressed a button next to the screen on the front of the drawer, and before Lynn was ready, it opened.

Without warning, McRae drew the sheet back from the body.

Lynn stood still, and her eyes widened. Amy's skin was pale blue and hung across the bones of her face like a draped sheet. Her neck was thick with round lumps, as if someone had stuck marbles under her skin.

Her face was bright white wherever bone pressed against skin—her cheekbones, the bridge of her nose, the tip of her chin. Her skin deepened into blue along the hollows of her cheek and under her eyes.

Lynn glanced down to where Amy's hands were positioned by her side and was shocked to see her fingernails cut down to the quick. The red nail polish was tattered in sheets at each ragged edge. The polish looked darker now, even mottled.

Lynn twitched, biting down on her lip, and looked back up at Amy's face. Startled, Lynn realized the horrible blue eyeshadow Amy wore now blended in with her skin color.

"That's enough," Lynn said abruptly.

When McRae hesitated, Lynn said, "That's Amy. I recognize her. I just don't want to look at her anymore."

With the efficiency of a hospital nurse, McRae put the sheet back in place and closed the drawer that housed Amy's body. "I'm sorry," McRae said gently. She thumbed the membrane screen, then said, "Four-four-oh-six-nine positively identified as Amy Stiller."

As they walked back down the aisle of the morgue, McRae's gold stiletto heels echoed noisily.

"You talked to Lieutenant Daly yet?" McRae said.

Lynn nodded.

McRae cocked her head. "Do they have anything?" Lynn hesitated, then shook her head. Lieutenant Daly had explained that experts usually gather enough evidence in the first several hours after a body is found to get a solid idea of who did it. But building

a case against the suspect usually took weeks, often months. In Amy's case, there was next to nothing to work with. It had been a forced entry, no fingerprints, and no skin cells under her fingernails.

Lynn said, "I'd rather not say anything."

McRae shook her head, clearly disgusted. "You don't have to. Look, I know it's none of my business, it's just that I'm getting tired of checking in women like you and me every day."

Lynn looked at McRae closely, and for the first time noticed how vulnerable she looked. Without the gold stiletto heels, McRae couldn't be any

taller than 5 feet. She had tiny little chicken arms, and probably didn't weigh any more than 100 pounds soaking wet. "It's been a tough year," Lynn said softly.

"Damn straight," McRae said, reaching for a clipboard that hung by the door to the morgue and pressing a series of membrane buttons on it. "I just fired my boyfriend last week and got myself a gunhand."

Startled, Lynn stared at McRae's hands.

McRae smiled and put down the clipboard. "You can hardly tell it's there, can you?" McRae gingerly pushed the sleeve of her lab coat up to her elbow. She held her forearm out, showing it off. "It's a .40 caliber autoloading pistol. It's made of stainless steel, with a synthetic skin cover.

"This model gives you good control and accuracy, and there's hardly any gun rise when you fire. It's even got a laser sighting system, which I've already had plenty of practice with—I'm out on the firing range every day." McRae beamed. "The best part is the neurological adrenaline booster. It makes it seem like time slows down if you're attacked, so you can figure out what to do. And it's got time-released painkillers that deaden most of the soreness." McRae looked up and frowned when she saw the disgusted look on Lynn's face. "Are you all right?"

"I'm sorry," Lynn said, unable to stop staring at the gunhand. "I've never seen one before. I saw a cop in a restaurant last week, and she had a gunhand. I don't understand..."

McRae glanced sharply at her. "What are *you* willing to give up to be able to protect yourself?"

"What?" Lynn looked up, looking disoriented, as if some kind of spell had broken. "What did you say?"

McRae shrugged. "I'm giving up the use of my hand until all this nonsense stops and life gets back to normal again. Then I'll go back to the doc and have 'em put my hand back on. They say all you need is a few months of physical therapy and you can probably regain most of the use of your hand."

"But what if you kill someone? What if you get charged with murder?" Lynn blurted.

McRae pulled her lab coat sleeve down over her gunhand again. The look in her eyes was cool and determined. "I'll tell you one thing: I'd rather be tried by 12 than carried by six."

Lynn stood still, staring at the morgue attendant.

McRae shrugged and picked up the clipboard with her other hand. "You're all set, Ms. Norland. Thanks for your help."

Lynn walked outside the police station, looking for a cab to hail.

Nobody had known at first that Amy had been killed. The police broke in after Amy failed to show up for work. They found her with a dry cleaning bag wrapped around her face.

Now, all Lynn could think about was the horrible mottled red of Amy's fingernails and the way her blue eyeshadow matched her skin and what Amy had said, just a few weeks ago: Evan's a great bodyguard—he protects me from the bad guys.

But Evan couldn't be with Amy 24 hours a day, Lynn thought. Nobody can.

She paused, realizing just how tired she was of all the people getting killed. She thought of the Wilhelmina Tice Fund, all the vid clips that she'd been watching, all the violence.

Then Lynn remembered what it felt like when, just for a moment, she thought she was Cat Ballou.

She turned and walked back into the police station, knowing what it was she was willing to sacrifice.

A week later, Lynn had just come home from work when her phone rang. Checking the readout, she saw that the call came from the lobby of her apartment building. "Hello?" she said, switching on the visual.

"Hello, Lynn." Evan's face appeared on the screen, looking tired and glum. "I'm sorry to stop by like this without giving you any warning...."

"Evan," she said, her sympathy rising. "Come on up." When she heard the knock at the door, Lynn slipped her left hand inside her blazer pocket.

"I'm sorry," Evan said, walking in. "I've been so distracted that I've had a hard time thinking straight. I should have called first."

"It's OK," Lynn said. "What's up?"

"I know it's a terrible time to ask, but Amy loaned you a VCR. It's something we bought together, and I'd like to take it back."

"Sure," Lynn said, walking to the living room. "It's in here."

Evan followed her, rolling up his shirt sleeves.

Without thinking, she reached for the VCR with both hands, and accidentally banged her gunhand against it. "Ow!"

Evan stared at her gunhand for a moment, then concentrated on disconnecting the VCR. In a conversational tone, he said, "I didn't know you were planning to get one of those things."

Lynn winced as her arm began to throb. "I wasn't. It was something of an impulse buy after I identified Amy."

"Must've been some impulse," Evan almost whispered. His tone then shifted, and he became apologetic. "I'm sorry you had to go through that. I wish they'd been able to find me to do it instead of you." He lifted the VCR, and when he turned around, she saw that his rolled-up shirt sleeves had risen above his elbows.

Lynn frowned, looking at the skin above his right elbow. There were three vertical welts on his upper arm, close together. "Hey, what happened?"

"Nothing," Evan said briskly. "I'll take this and let you get back to what you were doing."

Without thinking, Lynn reached out and pushed up his sleeve. The welts on his arm were long and narrow, running from close to his shoulder down to his elbow.

Scratches. Scratches that had been frantic enough to draw blood.

"Jesus God," Lynn said before she could stop herself.

Evan flashed his best smile at her. "What, that? The cat scratched me." He stood still, holding the VCR in his arms. "What's wrong?"

Lynn felt faint for a moment, as the whole world faded to white. "You don't have a cat."

Amy must have grabbed his arm, scratching him as she fought back. And the skin cells underneath her nails would have identified him. "You cut off her fingernails."

"Come on, Lynn." Evan's voice sounded tinny and distant. "A friend's cat scratched me. That's all."

She heard a soft thump and realized he must have put down the VCR.

Lynn felt the coolness of his touch on her hand.

Then Lynn remembered: how it felt when for a moment she thought she was Cat Ballou.

And how good it felt to kill a murderer, even if by accident.

The neurological booster chip wired into her gunhand kicked in. The booster affected her senses. The white faded, and the world came back into focus.

Continued on page 87

The dinosaurs have been extinct for over 65 million years—and lately, Professor Ivan Platymere hasn't been feeling too well himself either.

PREHISTORIC PARABLE

BY DAVID SHESKIN

Illustration by David McMacken

ON SABBATICAL, PROFESSOR IVAN PLATYMER, PERHAPS the most renowned paleontologist of the 20th century, has set the year aside to write the definitive tome on dinosaurs. The man, a confirmed bachelor, has always had one passion in life—his work. Respected for his meticulous and levelheaded approach toward understanding the evolution of life on our planet, Platymere enters his study to prepare for another arduous day of work. Books and paper scattered about, the man seats himself in front of his typewriter and types

out the title of the chapter on which he intends to spend the next month: *The Demise of the Dinosaurs*.

It is his specialty. For the last two decades he is the person people have come to when the question arises of why all of a sudden 65 million years ago dinosaurs vanished from the face of the Earth. Of course, no one really knows the answer, but of all those who pretend to know, Platymere, without a doubt, is the most cocksure. In his opinion, a glacial crisis, spread over a period of half a million years, gradually extinguished the longest domination by an order of animals on the planet. As he sees it, geological evidence amassed by him and others over the past three decades unequivocally supports the premise that the extinction of dinosaurs was a gradual process, rather than the result of some precipitous cataclysmic event such as a huge meteorite, a maverick comet, or an exploding star. Platymere considers the latter theories as little more than melodramatic poppycock. So far as he is concerned, his most recent fossil research in western Canada has, once and for all, relegated such theories to the arena of science fiction.

So, seated erect, with the smug look of a man who knows the answers to all of the important questions, a man who has had passed on to him the mission of educating the uneducated and illuminating the misinformed, Dr. Ivan Platymere types the beginning of Chapter Three.

"At the outset it should be made perfectly clear that like all things in nature, the demise of the dinosaurs can be explained parsimoniously with strict adherence to scientific principles. It is imperative to note that there is no need to fabricate oxymoronic theories, and those who do, do an injustice to rational thought as well as to the very laws of nature."

And then the doorbell rings. Rising from his chair, he wades his way past the books and notes, not to mention the fossils and bones and other prehistoric memorabilia scattered about the room, in order

to reach the door and tell whomever is there that he is busy, and that he has better things to do than listen to the idle chatter of someone selling Fuller brushes or the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, or drumming up membership for some branch of evangelical Christianity.

Much to his surprise, he sees a young boy standing at the door, holding out a sheet of paper. Admittedly, the child is a bit peculiar. He has a vacuous face which suggests vestiges of Mongolism or some other form of mental retardation. His pallid complexion is punctuated with patches of unsightly hair randomly scattered about his cheeks and temples. Behind him is a little red wagon filled with what appear to be old newspapers. Perched on the pile of papers is what can only be called the ugliest animal Platymere has ever seen. A dog? Its general physique and posture suggest so, yet its skin and peculiarly distorted face suggest otherwise. Gasping, the professor points towards the creature and asks the boy, "What in God's name is that?"

Opening a mouth that is more gums than teeth, the lad replies, "Oh, das jus mah pet daggy. Don wurry nun mistuh, he no bide."

Regaining his composure, Platymere gets down to business.

"And what may I do for you, young man?"

"Cud yuse pleze hep me out an sposer me tuh reed sum buks?"

Recollecting that it was that time of year again—schools sending kids around to get people to pledge money to charities based on how many books a child read—Platymere considers it rather remarkable that this child, who from what he can tell has limited mastery of the English language, can actually read. In truth, Platymere has little use for charities, since he views them as institutions that promote the survival of the unfittest—a practice he considers totally inconsistent with the process of natural selection. Nevertheless, instead of summarily sending the boy off on his way, curiosity gets the better of him and he inquires, "What charity are you reading for?"

"Ise reed fur da pesevashun uf indingered speechies."



"Endangered species, indeed," Platymere thinks to himself. In his view, organizations to preserve endangered species, more than any others, subverted the process of natural selection. After all, if species didn't become extinct, what use would there be for paleontologists such as himself? Yet incredibly, in spite of his feelings, he finds himself taking the piece of paper out of the boy's hand and affixing his signature on the top line, indicating that he will pay him 25 cents for each book he reads.

As he hands the pledge sheet back to the boy, for the first time he notices his eyes. A curious mixture of turquoise and silver, they glitter in the bright light as if they were speckles of glass inside a kaleidoscope. Unable to take his eyes off them, he is overcome by a feeling of lightheadedness. Within him there is a sense of imbalance—as if he's frozen in place, trapped in some limbo between this world and another. As he settles into this strange state of inertia, he becomes aware of a disconcerting sound. A lament of sorts—some piercing, plaintive echo suggesting great pain, that persists for what seems to be an eternity. How long he remains in this strange reverie he cannot say, but when he emerges from it some time after, the boy is gone.

GINKGOES, CHARACTERIZED BY FAN-SHAPED leaves, fleshy fruits, and edible nuts, along with cycads, a plant indeterminate in appearance between a fern and a palm, were among the most common flora found during the Triassic and Jurassic periods. Such plants thrived in the moist tropical climate that was typical of most areas of the Earth millions of years ago."

As he finishes the paragraph, Platymere sees the tree. He can see it just outside the window of his study. Most certainly it is not a species indigenous to New England. From where he sits, it has the appearance of being some sort of cycad, which somehow overnight materialized between the large oak tree and 50-year-old maple that shaded the south side of his house.

Abandoning his typewriter, he walks outside to examine it. Upon perusing the tree for a few minutes, he snips off a branch, after which he snaps three Polaroid pictures. Feeling perplexed, something the man is most definitely not used to, he decides that tomorrow morning he will drive into Boston and show what he's found to Professor Alvin Ludifer, the head of botanical studies at Harvard.

"IT CERTAINLY IS STRANGE TO FIND SOMETHING LIKE THIS in Vermont, but by no means is it impossible. We've had unusually mild weather over the past couple of months, and when coupled with abnormal wind currents, an anomaly like this can occur. I doubt, though, that a freak pollination like this can survive past December. In any event, Ivan, it's nothing to worry about, so go home and get back to your book."

Early that evening, following his talk with Ludifer, Platymere sits in front of his typewriter reading his manuscript. Sipping a glass of wine, he smugly concludes that he has done nothing less than a masterful job in presenting the evidence to refute those theories that suggest the demise of the dinosaurs was due to a cataclysmic event. But his mind wanders, and he finds himself looking out the window at the strange little tree that already seems to have grown at least a foot since yesterday. Suddenly he sees something behind it. An animal. Large and ponderous, it rises on its haunches, and once erect, bares a mouth chock-full of sharply pointed teeth. It is, without a doubt, a *Tyrannosaurus rex*! For a brief moment Platymere feels his heart stop beating. What is happening is impossible. After all, it is the 20th century and dinosaurs have been extinct for millions of years. Yet he finds himself not more than 30 yards away from what appears to be a prehistoric creature.

Although over the years more than a few people have called him various unflattering things—pompous, arrogant, intolerant, among others—one thing the man is not is a coward. For like a good soldier, he is on his belly crawling along the ground, as if he were a reptile, absorbing scrapes and scratches, in order that he might get a

closer look at this beast that has invaded his property. Not more than 10 yards from the creature's haunches, he is suddenly aware of a fetid odor. On closer inspection he sights a huge turd on the ground that would appear to have exited from the thing. As the animal plods about the brush that borders his property, Platymere carefully scrutinizes his first specimen of *Tyrannosaurus* dung. The smell suggests it is the real thing, and its general appearance indicates that the fabric of feces hasn't changed very much during the past 60 million years. The penetrating odor of the creature's excrement, along with the fact that each time its large feet make contact with the ground the earth shudders, suggest to Platymere that rather than being victim to some aberrant hallucination, what is happening to him is very real. So, as he stealthily crawls back toward his house, he plans a course of action. A phone call to the museum in Boston. Have them contact the appropriate scientific personnel at the university, in order to organize a crew to send up right away. No police. No military. At all costs the animal must be protected. Yet when he gets back into his study and picks up the phone, he no longer sees it. Just as it seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, the animal has now vanished. When he goes back outside to continue his search, all he can find is the turd.

"ANALYSIS OF THE STOOL SPECIMEN SUGGESTS A CARNIVOROUS creature. Its diet appears to consist mainly of protein with a moderate amount of carbohydrates. I would think the specimen could have come from a bear or some other large animal—perhaps a cougar or a lynx. Outside of that there's little more I can say."

Always curt and to the point, Dr. Olaf Vedders, head of animal physiology at the university, provides Platymere with what he's asked for. Finishing up with, "And if you're smart, Platymere, you'll keep any foolish ideas about this excrement coming from a *Tyrannosaurus rex* to yourself. In any event, I'd advise you to get a complete physical. The sorts of experiences you've been having could be due to some sort of brain dysfunction, and if I were you I'd want a doctor to rule out the possibility of a stroke or some other sort of cerebral episode."

A week later the chief of internal medicine at the medical school tells Platymere, "All tests are normal. Excellent blood chemistry, blood pressure remarkably low for a man your age, normal EKG, clear cerebrospinal fluid, CAT scan negative, absence of any signs of neurological impairment. All in all, Platymere, I'd say you're a remarkable physical specimen for someone your age. It must be all those digs you paleontologists always go on. Hefting an ax and shovel is bound to keep a body in tiptop shape. Anyway, in my opinion, the best thing you could do for yourself would be to take a vacation from dinosaurs and writing books and all those other good things you like to do. Take a couple of weeks off. Try to have some fun and relax. I'm willing to bet you that things will fall back into place."

AFTER A FEEBLE ATTEMPT AT A WEEK'S VACATION, Platymere finds himself seated in front of his typewriter. He has lost valuable time. In view of this, he has promised himself that he will work an extra two hours each day in order to get back on schedule. He is totally immersed in his work when the little boy rings his front doorbell. By this time, given the events of the past month, Platymere has all but forgotten the lad. Yet, on opening the front door, he actually shudders on seeing this rather unremarkable 9-year-old boy with the pallid complexion. Unremarkable, that is, except for his eyes. On seeing them again, Platymere thinks it positively amazing that any part of the human body could possess such luminescence. And then, of course, there is the boy's companion—the strange little dog. As he stands there, his eyes transfixed on the two of them, Platymere suddenly experiences a most peculiar feeling—some strange mixture of insight and dread. All at once he senses that this peculiar child is in some way related to the strange events that have occurred during the past month. Logically, of course, he knows it is ridiculous for him to feel this way, yet some force within him funnels this realization into his consciousness with penetrating clarity.

The boy holds out his hand and says, "Yuse oze me tree dolluhs and wenty fife cens."

Always quick with numbers, Platymere calculates that the sum suggests the boy has read 13 books. He finds it rather incredible that this lad who speaks broken English could have read as many as 13 books. Indulging his curiosity he says to the boy, "Gee, you're a bright little fellow. Thirteen books is an awful lot of reading. Would you mind telling me what books you read?"

Upon hearing the question the boy's eyes become even more brilliant—his irises taking on the appearance of two distant novas exploding with fulgent luminosity. He replies, "Was da madder mistuh, you don blieve Ise red all dem buks?"

Trying to appear unruffled by this unexpected challenge, Platymere smiles weakly and says, "Oh, I believe you. I'm just curious. I have a nephew about your age, and I thought that maybe I could get an idea for a good book to buy him for his birthday."

Throwing back his shoulders and jutting out his jaw, the boy responds, "I don tink your nepew wans to red da sem buks Ise red. He fine dem too borin."

This makes Platymere even more curious.

"Well then, how about me? I might want to read them."

"Don tink yuse wanna red dem buks eider mistuh. Luk, Ise godda go cuz if Ise nut home by fife o'clock, mah fadder wups me. Anywise Ise still godda collec monies fum two maw peeples."

As the boy turns around and starts to walk toward the road, Platymere calls out, "How about if I give you an extra dollar if you show me what books you read?"

The boy walks a few more steps and then cautiously turns around.

"Awneest?"

"Scout's honor."

"If yuh gib me two dolluhs Ise teh yuse."

"This kid is a real operator," thinks Platymere. "He may not speak the King's English, but he sure has a head for business." Although the whole thing is starting to border on the ridiculous, Platymere figures that he's gone too far to quit now.

"OK, you've got a deal."

"Ise cum bak tommoruh da sem tyme. Dens Ise brig wid me aw dem buks Ise red."

THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON, THE BOY ARRIVES PULLING his red wagon loaded with 13 books. Many of them are thick books, appearing to have 500 or more pages. A few are oversized, the sort one finds containing fine art prints. Perched on the pile is the boy's dog.

Handing the lad the \$2.00 he has promised him, Platymere cautiously approaches the wagon in order to examine the books. As he does this the little dog jumps off the pile, and baring its teeth like a Cheshire cat, it sits on the ground staring up at him. Although the titles really don't surprise Platymere, he nevertheless feels a surge of nausea well up inside him. Many of the books are old, some fairly recent, all very technical and far more sophisticated than anything a 9-year-old would be expected to read. Included in the small collection are such classics as *Reptiles of the Mesozoic Era*, *Problems of Phylogenetic Reconstruction from Fossilized Animal Remains*, *Dinosaurs—The Enigma of Evolution*, *A Vanished World—Pre-Cenozoic Vertebrates*.

Of course, the author of all the books is Dr. Ivan Platymere.

Feeling numb, with sweat pouring down his sides, Platymere cranes his head downward to look at the animal sitting by his feet. All at once he sees it for what it really is—not a dog, but, instead, some long-extinct creature from the prehistoric past. He then shifts his eyes toward the little boy, whose unusually dour face has assumed what appears to be a smile—a smile that reveals that what few teeth the lad has are pointed at their tips. And, of course, there are his eyes, which at the moment sparkle like glacial ice reflecting the sun. As Platymere stares at them, he suddenly becomes aware of soft rustling sounds in the woods that surround his house. Staring in that direction he sees them. Animals. Strange animals. Prehistoric creatures relegated to extinction well over 60 million years

ago. *Pterodactyls* gliding above the trees. On the ground at least two dozen dinosaurs—a *Tyrannosaurus*, some stegosauri, a *Triceratops*, a half-dozen diplodocids, four or five brachiosaurids. Alongside a pond that he's never noticed before on his property he sees a flock of smaller Mesozoic reptiles and mammals—fabrosaurids, heterodontosaurids, thescelosaurids, and ornithopods. In the water ichthyosaurs and plesiosaurs. Curiously, the oaks and maples that once bordered his land have been transformed into a dense mass of tropical vegetation consisting of yews, ginkgoes, cycads, huge conifers, flowing ferns, and oversized horsetails. The cool, crisp New England countryside has been metamorphosed into some subtropical prehistoric wilderness.

Although his psyche has been throttled into a state of inert quiescence, Platymere intuitively that somehow he has been delivered into the long distant past. Somehow he has been transported into a period to which no human has ever been privy. As he floats within this mysterious reverie, he catches sight of the strange little boy, who no longer seems alien and out of place. Indeed, he has the look of something feral and not quite human—a curious mixture of *Neanderthal* and *Homo erectus*.

As he stands there, Platymere is witness to the rhythms of prehistoric existence. The shrill cacophony of beasts who seem to be multiplying at an almost exponential rate. The thunder of combat. The tearing of flesh. Birth... survival... the food chain... death... decay. And after standing there for what seems like an eternity, Platymere hears a strange whistling sound coming out of the north sky. A sound so shrill and piercing that all the creatures around him stop whatever it is they are doing. The little boy is gone. But the dinosaurs remain. Millions of them.

Frozen in place like Platymere, they are hypnotized by the sound coming out of the sky. A sound that after a while becomes like a terrible interminable echo that promises to shatter the eardrums and resonate the water until it is nothing but a fine mist. And by the time the sound assumes a form—that of a huge orange ball of fire, the flames flickering voraciously around its circumference—Platymere has emerged from his trance. He is really here. Totally aware. Totally immersed in this prehistoric drama. For him, like the animals, there is no sanctuary. Round and ponderous and calamitous, the fiery thunderball plummets out of the heavens at a frightening speed, heading straight for the patch of land—that curious oasis in time and space—that Platymere shares with a menagerie of Mesozoic reptiles. A myriad of creatures in the throes of panic, all sensing their imminent extinction. And then, just before the meteorite that Platymere has said countless times could not have extinguished the flame of the dinosaurs vaporized an area the size of Rhode Island and caused a series of geological catastrophes that would destroy 90 percent of the life on earth, Platymere hears the wail of millions of dinosaurs. The haunting death rattle that precedes extinction.

THE NEXT DAY IN VERMONT, THE SUN'S RAYS are diffused in such a way as to give the brilliant blue sky an almost luminescent appearance. Platymere's house stands intact, untouched by the events of the past 24 hours. The only evidence to suggest that something peculiar has happened is an area 5 feet in diameter on the man's front lawn that is burned to a crisp. On closer inspection it appears to be a crater of sorts that is filled with ashes. By the time people realize that Platymere is missing and someone takes it upon himself to visit his house, the ashes have been scattered about by the wind.

ONE YEAR AFTER HIS MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE, DR. Ivan Platymere is declared legally dead. Six months later he is posthumously awarded a Nobel Prize for his contribution toward understanding the evolution of life on our planet. In the Nobel citation, special note is made of Platymere's role in once and for all refuting the long popular theory that the extinction of the dinosaurs was the result of the Earth being devastated by a huge meteorite. □



THE KINGDOM OF CATS & BIRDS

BY GEOFFREY A. LANDIS
Illustration by Kris Waldherr

As the three sisters made their way
through the world penniless and alone,
they learned that even more valuable than
silver and gold are the magical
powers of Feathers and Fur.

ONCE THERE WAS a poor widow who had three daughters. The oldest daughter, Anne, was very beautiful. She loved to sing and play her harp, and it was said that her singing was more beautiful than the song of any turtledove.

The youngest, Celia, was lithe and slender. She loved to run and hunt and scamper to the top of all the hills in the neighborhood, and it was said that there was no mountain she could not climb, and no boy she could not best at any game he would care to name.

But the middle daughter, Beth, was neither beautiful like her older sister, nor athletic like her younger sister, but had only her wit, common sense and good humor.

One day the poor widow called her daughters to her. "Times have been hard," she said, "and I have nothing to give you. You will have to go out into the world and make your own way. Anne, you are fair and have a good heart, but you are too easily fooled by the world. Celia, you are agile and have a strong spirit, but you are too straightforward, while the world is crooked. You both must promise to listen to your sister Beth, and do what she says. Beth, you must use your cleverness to take care of your sisters, and see that no harm comes to them." And so the two sisters promised to obey their wise middle sister, and they set out into the world.

After traveling for a very long time, they found themselves in a deep forest. The night got darker and darker, and soon they saw that they were surrounded by hundreds of glowing yellow eyes. The

oldest sister tried to hide, and the youngest sister prepared to fight, but the middle sister looked calmly back into the night, and said, "We are three sisters alone in the world and mean you no harm."

Out of the darkness stepped an uncommonly large red cat. He rubbed up against a tall tree, and spoke in a low, meowy voice. "You may mean us no harm, but you may not stay here, for I am the king of the cats, and this is the country of the cats, and none but cats may stay here." And as he spoke, cats of all sizes and colors came out of the woods by twos and threes and dozens, until the clearing was full of cats, all of them looking at the sisters with glowing yellow eyes.

But Beth, the middle sister, boldly replied, "Then all is well, for we too are cats."

The red cat laughed in a purring sort of voice and said, "I think you are no cats, but for the moment I will let you live, and we shall see. Night has fallen, and it is time for us to hunt. I shall see what you bring back."

The red cat stretched, then in a single bound disappeared into the woods. By twos and threes

and dozens, the other cats likewise disappeared into the night.

"What shall we do?" asked Anne, "for we are surely lost now." But Beth only nodded to Celia, who disappeared into the woods.

After a while the cats began to return, by twos and threes and dozens. One had a mouse, and another a mole. This one had a chipmunk, and that one a squirrel, and yet another brought a rabbit. At last the king of the cats came back, bringing a woodchuck that was quite larger than he was. They all looked at the two sisters.

Just then Celia burst into the clearing, bringing with her a doe she had chased down and caught. She put the doe down in the middle of the glade, and it stood there for a moment, dazed, then turned and bounded off into the woods.

"It seems you can hunt," said the king of the cats, "but yet and still, I think you are no cats. We shall see. It now approaches midnight, and time for the cats to serenade." With that, all the cats commenced to yowling, in high voices and low, with growls and hisses and meows of every pitch and timbre. Celia put her hands over her ears to block out the awful din, but Beth only nodded to Anne.

Anne began to sing, a song with no words that blended in and harmonized with the wailing of all the cats. So pure and lovely was her voice, that it made the caterwauling of the cats seem like a choir backing up a singer. After a while the cats began to stop their yowling to listen, until at last only three continued, a small white cat with a contralto meow, a huge old tom with scarred ears yowling

us no harm, but you may not stay here." Into the clearing stepped an enormous bird, with magnificent plumage of every color and a wickedly pointed beak. "For this is the country of the birds, and I am the queen of the birds. Only birds may stay here, and here you may not stay."

And in truth, as the sisters' eyes began to see into the gloom, they saw that birds were fluttering and flitting all around them, and that they were surrounded by birds' nests, so that it was a wonder that they had not trampled through nests in their walking. Before them was the largest nest of all.

"So then all is well," said the intrepid sister, "for indeed we are birds ourselves."

"If you are birds, you are most peculiar birds indeed," said the queen of the birds, turning her head to look at them first with one eye, then with the other. "If birds you are, then you can do whatever it is we birds can do?"

"Of course," said the dauntless sister.

"Of course," said the queen bird. "In the distance, then, look on yonder crag. It is a haven against the four-legged and two-legged creatures that steal eggs, for its sides are so steep that none might climb there. On the summit is the nest of the rare misander bird. Perhaps you would fly there and bring me back a feather, of which there are many discarded in the nest?"

"Certainly," said Beth. "My sister Celia will gladly fetch a feather for you." And Celia disappeared into the night, while Beth and

Anne told stories of their travels to keep the queen bird amused.

In a while, Celia returned. And since there was no crag so steep that Celia could not scamper to the top, she carried in her hands a lovely feather of a deep purple hue, the feather of the rare and beautiful misander bird.

The queen bird looked at the feather in silence and then looked at the sisters. After a while she spoke again. "Night has fallen," she said, "and it is time for the birds of the evening to sing the sun to rest. Since you have not yet tucked your heads under your wings like the birds of the daytime, perhaps you would care to join our serenade?" Without waiting for a reply, the queen bird began to trill, and with her a thousand bird voices sang out of the darkness.

Beth nodded to her sister Anne, and Anne joined her voice to the chorus. Her voice was so pure and sweet that after a while the birds fell silent to listen, saving only for a nightingale singing alto, who swept down out of the trees to sing on Anne's right shoulder; a turtledove tweeting harmony in soprano, who fluttered down out of the trees to perch on Anne's left shoulder; and the queen of the birds leading the melody in a treble warble.

At the rising of the moon the birds fell silent, and Anne sang the last chorus alone.

"You sing as sweetly as any bird," said the bird queen, "but in one thing you are sadly remiss. It is nesting season, and all of us treasure our eggs above everything else and keep them warm. But it has now grown quite cool, and even I, myself, must return to my eggs, which are certainly growing chill." But when the bird queen looked into her nest, she discovered that while they were singing Beth had covered up the eggs with a shawl to keep them warm against the night air.

"You are most peculiar birds," said the bird queen, "if indeed birds you truly are. But I do declare that you are welcome to stay here with us, if so you desire."

And so they stayed in the country of the birds.

After many months all the eggs were hatched, all the birds were restless and all the fledglings were flitting and fluttering in longer and longer flights. "Autumn has come," said the queen of the birds, "and it is time again for us to fly away to the south. Will you not be flying with us?"

Beth shook her head.

"Then we must part, and you must make your way as you can.

INTO the clearing stepped an enormous bird, with magnificent plumage of every color and a wickedly pointed beak.

in baritone, and the king of the cats singing along in a perfect tenor.

When they finally stopped, and the last note hung on the night air like a dandelion seed, the king of the cats spoke again. "It seems you can sing," said the king of the cats, "but yet and still I think you are no cats. We shall see."

The king of the cats commenced to sit down and wash his paws and then his ears, and then he curled around and began to wash the length of his tail. All around, the cats began to wash each other, holding each other down with their paws and, with great seriousness, washing each others' whiskers, ears, and necks. Beth pulled out her hairbrush and began to brush the cat king behind his ears and down his back.

"I still think you are no cats," said the king of the cats, but he purred as he spoke. "But yet and still, you may stay with us if you will."

And so the three sisters stayed snug and warm in the kingdom of the cats, even over the winter, surrounded by cats of all descriptions.

After many months the king of the cats said to the middle daughter, "Spring has arrived, and it is the tradition of cats to go our separate ways, meeting only on the dark side of the moon. But you have been very good to us, and if there is ever any favor you need of us, you need only to clap twice and call me, and I will be there."

With a bound the king of the cats disappeared into the forest, and by twos and threes and dozens the other cats followed, each stopping briefly by the daughters to be stroked one final time. But soon the three daughters were again alone.

"What shall we do?" said Anne.

"We shall go forth into the world and seek our fortunes," Beth replied firmly, "for that is what our mother has told us to do."

And so they went forth.

After they had walked a long long way, evening came, and the sky began to grow dark. They were walking through a wide meadow filled with bushes and plants, and all around them they could hear rustlings and low noises, though they could see no one following.

At last Beth called for the other two sisters to stop. She peered into the evening darkness and called out in a clear, strong voice, "Who are you? Why are you following us? We are three sisters alone in the world and mean you no harm."

Out of the darkness spoke a high, trilling voice. "You may mean

But, if ever you need a favor from the birds, you have only to clap three times and call, and I shall help you, if it is within my powers. Farewell."

And so the queen of the birds flapped her huge wings once and flew away into the sky, followed by her children, each one chirping, "Goodbye! Goodbye! Goodbye!" until they were so distant that all that could be heard was the plaintive sound of the wind. And flock by flock, the other birds trilled and chirped their farewells to the three sisters, the ducks and the herons and the geese, leaving only the birds of winter, who scattered to the winds to scratch out their livings one by one until spring came.

"Be of good cheer, my sisters," said Beth, dauntless. "We must continue on to seek our fortunes in the wide world."

The sisters walked on, and after much traveling they came again to a land of fields and farms. Beth grew fearful for their safety as they were three defenseless girls traveling alone, and so told her sisters that perhaps it would be prudent if they were to change their garb.

Beth and Celia cut off their tresses and donned the trousers and jerkins of young men. Anne, though, had filled out in their travels to become quite a comely young woman, and they agreed that no amount of disguise could make her appear to be a man. So they journeyed onward in the guise of two brothers traveling as guardians and protectors of their beautiful sister.

IN TIME THEY CAME TO A GREAT

castle. Judging that in such a castle none would offer them harm, Beth strode forthright to the thick wooden door and knocked on the huge brass knocker for admittance.

Beth was surprised when the gate was opened and they were welcomed in by none other than the king himself. The hour was late, and with her most humble manner she explained to him that they were weary travelers who asked only for the most meager of shelter in the stables and whatever scraps of food might be considered too poor to be eaten at his table.

The king, though, would not be persuaded but to feed them from his dining room, summoning the chief cook out from his quarters to prepare a lavish repast for the weary travelers. After they had eaten, he had them shown to a sumptuous suite of rooms.

In the morning they found that for the two boys (for such he took them to be) the king had laid out rich clothing to replace their worn cloaks, and for their sister nothing would do but that she replace her simple frock with the best dress in the royal wardrobe. After they were well rested he invited them to break their fast at the royal table.

The king was a melancholy young man, and after Beth had treated him to a much abbreviated account of their travels, he sighed. "Though I would invite you to stay as my guests for as long as you would," he said, and sighed again, "mine is a sorely troubled kingdom, and it would not be right for me to ask you to share my problems. To the north are only the mountains, but to the south is the kingdom of Banting, a rich and prosperous place. I expect that there you could indeed find yourselves a home."

"I thank you for your kind wishes and your advice," said Beth. "The responsibilities of kingship, I am sure, are a difficult burden. It is to your credit that you have concern for your people, but perhaps excessive worry may make your troubles appear worse than they truly are."

"I would that it were so," said the king, "but my troubles are several, and any of them alone would be enough to unmake my kingdom. Long ago my father quarreled with the king of Banting, and since my father has died, he covets my kingdom, and has promised his kingdom and mine to whichever of his sons can conquer my land. Prince Fobbish is a dutiful son and has promised his father that he will conquer my country before the spring. And his other son, Prince Bantingroy, is a brave and hearty warrior, and he, too, has promised his father that he will conquer my lands by spring. What army I have could not even fight off one prince, and certainly not two.

"Were that not enough, my country has been beset with troubles.

Every spring a swarm of locusts comes to eat the seedlings as fast as my farmers can plant, and a plague of mice comes to eat all of my stores of grain, and so I have emptied the royal treasury just to feed my people, and there is no money left to pay soldiers. When spring comes, the land will belong to Prince Bantingroy," he shrugged, "or perhaps Prince Fobbish. I only hope that the prince— whoever it will be—will bring grain to feed my people. If he does, he will be a better ruler to the people than I have been."

Beth's heart went out to the young king, and she resolved to help him in any way she could. "Your troubles are indeed great," she said. "But appoint me your chief counselor, and perhaps we can find a way to reverse your fortunes."

The king was surprised that a penniless stranger should make so brash an offer, but after a moment of reflection he accepted the offer. "After all," he said, "your advice could not make the situation any worse than it already is."

"Then tell me more about this Prince Fobbish, and also of Prince Bantingroy," she said.

And so the king and Beth spoke together well into the afternoon, and indeed on into the early night. After hearing all, Beth said, "Make my si—ah, brother here general of all your army against Prince Bantingroy, and with your leave I will have a look at the army of Prince Fobbish. And, with God's grace, all will yet turn out well."

Although the king's soldiers were not many, Celia was quite pleased to have command of them and drilled them with enthusiasm. Soon her example inspired all the soldiers, and they were eager to face the armies of Prince Bantingroy, for they considered this to be an easier task than that of pleasing their new general, who could—and frequently did—best any one of them at any form of combat you could name.

In the meanwhile, Beth looked over the armies of Prince Fobbish and came back to the castle asking for a pail full of black walnut dye, and another pail of red berry dye. These the king provided.

Following Beth's instructions, Anne trained the women and girls of the castle to play the fife, blow the bugle, and beat the heavy war drums that army commanders use to communicate maneuvers to their flanks.

As Celia led her small squad out to meet Prince Bantingroy's army, the women drummers went out by a different path, to make a cacophony of sound like that of a very large army.

And so the armies of Prince Bantingroy were led around and around in large circles and small, first by catching a glimpse of the squadron of General Celia, and then hearing the drums and bugles of an army across the nearby hill, but never catching up to the army they could quite well hear but never see.

At last Prince Bantingroy grew disgusted with such tactics. Ignoring the temptation to chase after the phantom army, he marched his army straight for the castle. Camping just half a day's march from the castle, he sent his seneschal to issue a challenge: "Enough of this skirmishing and pointless marching. Let the battle be decided man to man. If this mysterious general has courage to equal his skill at skirmishing, let him show it. Prince Bantingroy challenges him. Let each promise that if the other should win, he shall surrender his forces immediately."

Celia sent a messenger back to accept his offer, and a date was set for the combat.

When the day of the combat dawned, Prince Bantingroy arrived in full armor upon a huge and restless steed of midnight black. He was a tall and muscular young man, with a beard of darkest black and piercing black eyes. He saluted the castle with his lance, then threw the lance down into the ground and issued his challenge again.

From the castle rode out a single armored rider on a chalk white filly. The rider drew up to the line, dismounted, and removed his visor, and Prince Bantingroy was surprised to see a slender and graceful youth meet his curious gaze with steadfast gray eyes.

"I accept your challenge," said the youth. "I am the general you seek."

The prince was surprised that such a beardless youth could be the

general of such an army, but his heart went out to the boy, who was brave enough to stake his life to certain defeat for the sake of his men and his king. And so he resolved to spare the life of the boy if he could. "I propose, then, that the first trial of the day be archery," said the prince, "three arrows each at a maple leaf set to a bale of straw at a furlong's distance, the winner to be the closest shot."

"Three shots to hit a maple leaf a mere furlong away?" The youth shrugged carelessly. "Very well, then, I accept. Give me leave to send my page back for my bow."

While the target was being set, the page returned with the bow. Prince Bantingroy shot first. His first arrow hit the straw halfway between the edge of the bale and the leaf. His second shot was a mere finger's span from the leaf, and the third shot grazed the edge of the leaf.

The prince smiled and put down his bow. "Match that, if you can."

The youth carefully strung his bow and selected arrows fletched in green, silver, and white. He paused for a moment, eyeing the target and feeling the air, then drew and fired.

Before the first arrow had struck the target the bow twanged twice more, and its two brothers were on the wing as well. One, two, three, the arrows struck the target, and all three pierced the leaf within the span of a silver crown from the center. A great cheer went out from the crowd.

"Your aim was true," the youth said calmly, "but you must pay more heed to the breeze caressing your cheek."

Prince Bantingroy, who had thought himself the best archer in the countryside, nodded in silence.

"For the second contest," said the youth, "I propose a footrace, three times around the castle."

"I accept," said the prince. "We shall race at sunset."

AT SUNSET THE TWO CHALLENGERS

were ready, the prince stripped down to barely more than a loin-cloth, the youthful general still wearing his white tunic. The prince thought this slightly odd, but forbore to comment. The seneschal banged his starting drum, and the race began.

Once around the castle, and the runners appeared from behind the castle, the prince first and the young general far behind. A groan came from the castle, but the prince's men cheered loudly.

A second time around and the prince was still ahead, although perhaps not so much. The crowd was silent.

The third time the runners appeared, though, the two were abreast. Prince Bantingroy was panting, his face purple and sweat pouring across his chest. The youth, though, was calm, his legs moving with an even rhythm. As they approached the finish line, the prince was unable to keep his pace and fell behind. The crowd from the castle cheered anew. "Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah for the boy general!"

The prince collapsed on the ground. "Enough of games," he said, gritting his teeth and gasping. "The last and final contest shall be wrestling, winner take all, the contest to continue until one of the contestants concedes the match and with it his army. I shall meet you three days hence, at dawn."

The crowd groaned aloud, for Prince Bantingroy was a burly man, far outmuscling the slender youth. The youth, however, was undaunted. "Very well, then," he said. "A wrestling contest for the final challenge, winner take all."

In the meanwhile, Beth and Anne had slipped out to meet the armies of Prince Fobbish, who was even at that very moment on the march toward the kingdom.

Prince Fobbish rode in a silver carriage decorated with golden braid, and his army held long lances carried high, each with a gold and silver pennant flying from the end, for the prince believed that an army that looked its best would fight all the harder for its prince.

As the prince traveled, he grew perplexed. At last he ordered his carriage stopped. "Do you hear a maiden singing?" he asked his general, who was riding a war horse along side the carriage. "It seems to me that the voice is uncommonly sweet. Find out from where it is coming."

"Yes, my prince," said the general, who rode off into the forest. In a minute he was back. "In a clearing in the forest, there is a forest

maid, of brown hair and apple-blossom complexion," he said. "She sings as she combs her hair."

"Ask her if she would come here," commanded Prince Fobbish, "that she may sing to us for luck." The general rode again off into the forest.

In a moment he returned. "She is gone."

"Find her. I hear her singing yet; she cannot be far," said the prince, although in truth the voice did seem fainter, at times almost indistinguishable from the noises of the forest. "Send your men to find her. Today I shall not ride farther until I see her face and listen to her sweet voice."

The general saluted and sent his army out to search the woods. Often they caught a glimpse of brown hair, or heard a voice singing, but as they turned to look closer, it would turn out to be no more than a little brown bird perched in the low branches of a tree, singing. And, chasing after the singing of little birds all the morning and afternoon, they wandered in circles through the forest.

"It seems to me that there are an uncommon number of birds in this woods," said the general, "but then, as I do not usually walk through the woods seeking a brown-haired maid, perhaps it is only that I have never before noticed. Still, it would not seem that a single maid would be so hard to find."

When the evening came the soldiers returned one by one to their prince, admitting defeat. The prince took it in good humor. But as his men raised the silver- and gold-trimmed tent for Prince Fobbish, the prince could not help but think of the distant song, and he slept dreaming of a brown-haired maiden.

The next day they broke camp at dawn and returned to the march, the silver and gold pennants of the army making a glorious sight in the morning sun. They had not traveled many miles, though, before again the prince heard singing, and indeed a melody even sweeter than before. Again he ordered his carriage stopped, and the prince walked out himself with his general into the woods.

They came to a clearing where sat a maiden with hair of autumn-leaf red, playing a lap harp and singing softly. The prince made a soft noise of wonder at her beauty, and she looked up. For a moment she smiled, and it seemed to the prince that the sun then shined, and that it had been a long time since he had seen the sun. He was too far from the maiden to talk to her, and between them was a stand of thorn bushes.

By the time he had found the path through the bushes and reached the clearing, she was gone.

"Find her," commanded the prince. "Tell her I only wish to listen to her singing and gaze upon her face. Only that and no more."

As the men searched the forest, they would often see a flash of red hair and hear a snatch of song, only to find looking back at them nothing but an orange tomcat, sitting on a branch mewing.

"It does seem to me," said the general, "that I have never before seen so many cats in the forest. But doubtless, since neither have I ever searched a forest for a red-haired maiden, it is only that I have never noticed." And again the men returned at sunset to report their failure.

That night, when the prince finally fell asleep, it was of a red-haired maid that he dreamed.

On the next day the prince resolved to ride directly to the battle. But again he heard singing, and this time the singing was so clear and so strong that he thought the singer could be no more than a few feet away from the road.

The prince motioned his men to stay back and went alone into the woods.

The maid sat in a clearing, and her hair was the color of the honey made by bees that have fed only on spring clover. Again she looked up at him, and it seemed to the prince that she said something, but he was just far enough away that he could not quite catch her words before she slipped off into the woods. "Wait," shouted the prince. "I mean you no harm! I just want to...." But the maid was gone.

He called his men. "A hundred crowns of silver to the man who finds her," he said. "And heed me well, she is not to be harmed or coerced."

While the men searched the forest, chasing after birds and cats, the prince sat in melancholy by the road. But his mood could not be dark for long, for the singing lifted his spirits. He looked up, and there was the maid. "Wait," he shouted, but she again slipped away.

He followed her into the woods, but whenever he caught a glimpse of her, she was just ahead of him, slipping out of sight.

IN THE MEANWHILE, PRINCE BANTINGROY arrived at the field for the wrestling match. He stripped to the waist, but the mysterious youth again declined to strip down, preferring to wrestle in his tunic. They bowed to each other, and the match began.

While the prince was much the stronger, the mysterious youth was agile, and every time the prince nearly made a hold, the youth would twist out of it and slip to the other side. But neither could the youth gain any advantage over Prince Bantingroy.

The match went on for an hour, and yet another, and while both sides were panting and covered in sweat, neither would yield.

But in wrestling some secrets cannot be kept, and after a while the prince had a most peculiar suspicion about his mysterious young opponent. Finally he sprang back and stared at the youth. With his tunic wet down with sweat and clinging to his body, there was no way to conceal the truth. "You are no lad, but a maid," said the prince in surprise.

"Indeed, and so I have always been," said the girl. "Do you yield?"

"I will yield on the day you marry me," said Prince Bantingroy.

"Very well, then," said Celia. "Let us go find the king, and his counselor, whose sister I am, to tell them of our decision."

When they reached the castle, camped in the fields all around were armies flying the pennants of Prince Fobbish. "It is my foolish brother!" exclaimed Prince Bantingroy. "I cannot allow him to conquer. Let me go to fetch my army, and you yours, and we shall drive my brave but foolhardy brother back home crying to my father."

"The army does not seem arrayed for fighting," said Celia, looking at the soldiers with a practiced eye. "I think we should first talk to the king and see what is occurring."

And, indeed, when they got to the castle, Prince Fobbish was already there in company with the king, as well as Anne and the still-disguised Beth.

"I have negotiated peace with Prince Fobbish, who has just asked me for the hand of my counselor's sister in marriage," said the king. "So I therefore declare this a day of celebration and feasting, even though—as I assume—you have come to demand that I surrender my kingdom."

"Not at all," said Prince Bantingroy. "I have come to ask for peace between our kingdoms, and, with your permission and the leave of your counselor here, to ask for the hand of your general in marriage."

The king was surprised to find that his general was in fact a girl, but made haste to give his permission, as, with a smile, did his counselor. And so the two sisters went back to make wedding preparations.

"Alas," said the king to Beth, "though all your work has prevented the war, still my kingdom is sorely troubled. The granaries of the kingdom are full of seed, but every spring, mice and rats come and eat it all before we can plant. And as for what seed we plant, as fast as the seedlings sprout, a horde of locusts comes and devours them."

"Then with your leave I shall make a visit to the farms and fields," said Beth. And so she did.

When she reached the royal granary she proceeded to clap her hands twice and call for the king of the cats.

From seemingly nowhere came the large red tomcat. He sat down in front of Beth and began to wash his paws. "And what do you want?" he said querulously. "You have already asked your favor of me, to mislead soldiers in the woods, and I do not think I feel like

granting another favor to you today."

"I did not call you to ask a favor," Beth replied, "but to thank you. In gratitude, I would like you to take note of the granaries and farms of this kingdom, which are full of plump and lazy field mice."

"Is that so?" said the king of the cats in a purring voice. "That is most interesting news indeed. I thank you." The cat king got up, stretched once, and bounded off.

Next she visited the fields, and when she was again alone she clapped three times and called for the queen of the birds.

In a few moments the enormous bird swooped out of the sky and landed before her. "I am glad to see you again," said the bird queen, looking at her first with one eye and then with the other, "but we birds are quite busy now preparing for our migration, and in any case, I think that we no longer owe you any favors. So if you don't mind, I shall continue on my way."

"I did not call you to ask a favor," said Beth, "but to make a gift to you. Every spring a swarm of locusts settles onto these fields. It would be quite a fat repast, should any birds wish to stop by."

HIS tunic wet down with sweat and clinging to his body, there was no way to conceal the truth. "You are no lad, but a maid."

"Indeed?" said the queen of the birds. "Then this is most welcome news, for we are most hungry from migration. I shall tell my flock." And the bird queen flapped once and vanished into the sky.

So when the spring came, again the winter-hungry mice returned to invade the seed stores, but there were cats everywhere to catch them, and so this time the farmers had plenty of seed to sow. When the seedlings began to sprout, again swarms of locust descended to dine on their accustomed feast of tender young plants, but as fast as they could arrive, flocks of birds swooped down to eat them, and the plants were saved.

And so when the day of the royal weddings came, there was much to celebrate indeed. The king of Banting was far too pleased over the marriage of his sons to be disappointed that the princes had not conquered the kingdom. And after the feasting, he came over and privately promised the full support of his armies should anyone else ever think to invade.

Her sisters now seen to safety and their wanderings finished, the king's counselor finally decided to end her deception as well and revealed to the king that she was no lad at all.

After getting over his surprise, he declared that since her sisters had wedded royalty, nothing less would suit than that she should marry royalty as well, and so he asked for her to be his queen. Since the king was himself still a young man, she readily agreed, and he promised her that he would accept her wise advice just as intently when she was his queen as he did when she was his counselor.

And so it was that three sisters became queens of three kingdoms.

It was often remarked upon by the people that wherever the queens were, there were always birds of every description singing in the trees, even in winter; and also that there were always friendly cats that the three queens would invariably pet and pamper with milk and tidbits of meat. Since the three queens had brought prosperity and peace with them, birds and cats came to be considered signs of luck throughout the kingdoms, and so it happened that no one in the kingdoms would shoot a bird, and that stray cats were welcomed to a warm hearth and the choicest assortment of scraps at even the poorest household.

And perhaps there is some truth to the stories of luck, since the lands remain prosperous and peaceful, even to this very day. □

They were the most advanced civilization in the universe, free from want, hunger, and fear. If only they could be free from Vossoff and Nimmitz, the galaxy's most inept space criminals!

JUST A COUPLE OF SENTIENTS SITTING AROUND TALKING

BY ADAM-TROY CASTRO

Illustration by Joel F. Naprstek

THEIR ORBITAL MAPPING COMPLETED, VOSSOFF AND NIMMITZ found their first impression to be correct: with the possible exception of Earth itself, which ever since the overzealous redecorating binge of 2754 had been the planetary equivalent of a dentist's waiting room, Fyliss VII had to be the single dullest inhabited place in the known universe.

There were no surface features whatsoever. There were no jungles filled with ravenous beasts locked in savage struggles for survival, no architecturally improbable mile-high spires left by vanished alien civilizations, and no optical-illusion canals to interest the crackpot population of the next inhabited planet over. There were no valleys or mountains, no oceans or icecaps or deserts, no volcanoes or fjords, no swamps or geysers or cliffs, no prairies or tundra, and not even any gently sloping hills, and let's face it, even the dullest solid planet has gently sloping hills, even if they're only a few inches high and therefore no good for tobogganing. But not Fyliss VII, the cue-ball planet, a smoothly polished sphere with a white sky and a white landscape and a white horizon—a planet that all in all just didn't seem to have a point to it.

The ship's brain said that the planet was home to an ancient civilization of



Beings Far More Advanced Than Man. That was all the ship's brain said; the rest of the entry was randomized gibberish. This was par for the course, as Nimmitz had stolen the memory systems from a street vendor.

Nimmitz scratched his head, which was smooth and hairless and therefore resembled Fyliss VII a lot more than he would have liked to admit. "Where's the ancient civilization of Beings Far More Advanced Than Man?"

"Well," replied Vossoff, instructing the computer to put the necessary graphic on-screen, "assigning this latitude here as the equator, and this here as the meridian, it's 34 degrees north, 53 degrees west. Where the x is."

"That's an advanced civilization? There's nothing there. Just a couple of sentients sitting around talking."

Vossoff regarded the magnified picture on the orbital cameras: an aerial shot of two hairless sexless bipeds busily chatting with each other. One of the bipeds was light gray, the other dark gray. The

FED UP, Vossoff blasted the darker alien out of existence. The lighter alien seemed to hover in the air a split second before falling to the ground.

light one was on his hands and knees, forming a makeshift bench upon which the dark one sat. "Nobody said it was an exciting advanced civilization."

"I hope not. Sitting on each other like that."

"If they're as advanced as the Brain says, maybe we're not meant to understand it."

"Maybe they're the local village idiots and the truly advanced population is underground laughing at them. Sitting on each other like that."

"No. I've run a thorough density scan of the entire planet. There are no caves, no artifacts, no geological layering, not even a molten core. Sliced in half, this globe would be as homogenous as a baked potato. No, my friend. I'm afraid those two sentients, boring and undistinguished as they appear to be, are the entire fabled advanced civilization of Fyliss VII."

Nimmitz couldn't take his eyes off the little red x on the screen. "I don't think there's anything worth stealing here, Ernst. They don't even have chairs."

"They might have secrets," said Vossoff. "And they, my friend, are always worth looting."

THEY LANDED THE STARSHIP JUST OVER THE horizon from the fabled advanced civilization. It was a rough landing, as the starship was one of those inverted pyramid things that used to be all the rage among starfarers a few decades back, and while it looked nicely retro, it was also incredibly top-heavy.

Vossoff and Nimmitz had a few tense moments when the ship started to tip, but managed to compensate by hastily shifting some crates of highly illegal stimulants in the cargo hold.

"Gotta get the stabilizers fixed," gasped Nimmitz.

"Make enough money on this trip," said Vossoff, "we won't have to." He jabbed his blaster into its holster. "Come on."

They descended the gangplank and began their cross-country trek toward the fabled advanced civilization of Fyliss VII. The walk was, as anybody could have predicted, a dull one. Anybody painting landscapes here could have produced them at the rate of 10 a minute. The emptiness was so total that only men as coarse as Vossoff and Nimmitz could have failed to be terrified by it. But then, they were men who lived for the deal, the scam, the sting, the easy

way to riches, the satisfaction of knowing they'd just screwed somebody out of something. They were men willing to rob and kill for a percentage point but were really only good at getting themselves screwed first.

They walked two kilometers, before their detail-starved eyes picked up a miniscule gray dot on the horizon ahead. As they approached, the gray dot resolved itself into the two hairless bipeds, who had shifted position since Vossoff and Nimmitz had spotted them from orbit: now the dark one provided the bench on which the lighter one sat. Both seemed utterly comfortable with this arrangement, which had evidently been going on for generations, as the bipeds had both evolved padded hands and knees.

Vossoff and Nimmitz approached to within several meters of the aliens, waiting in vain for the other shoe to drop. It didn't. If it was going to drop at all, it was one hell of a big shoe.

It was Nimmitz who broke the silence. "Fine way to be spending their days. Sitting on each other like that."

Vossoff fingered his walrus moustache contemplatively. "You should open your mind, my friend. Ever been to Phlaaaarg IX, home of the N'loghthi? They punctuate all their spoken sentences by hitting each other in the face with creamy pastries. Their planetary legislature looks like a roadshow pie fight. Next to that, this is relatively normal."

"But why do they sit on each other like that?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's a mating ritual. Or maybe it's their religion. Or maybe—"

For the first time, the lighter alien took notice of them. "Or maybe," it said, in perfectly accented Interlac, "we're just extremely civilized, that's all."

NIMMITZ FELL BACK A STEP AND SAID, "GAAAAAA."

Vossoff, who usually took surprises well, didn't sound much better. "You...understand us?"

"Oh," the lighter alien said, "we understand every known language. We don't get visitors often, but when we do, the planet itself translates for us. One of the many transdimensional mechanisms we've set up to support our lives here."

Nimmitz broke in: "Why do you take turns sitting on each other like that?"

"Isn't it obvious? We live on a planet with no chairs and no resources to build chairs. Since we consider sitting on the ground barbaric, one of us must be a chair at all times. If we were not as civilized as we are, one of us would force the other to be the chair permanently, but we are an ancient and advanced race and, therefore, we politely take turns."

"Without anything so crude as a monetary system," the darker alien amplified, "this is also as close as we come to having an economy."

"Yes," the lighter alien said. "Supply and demand."

Nimmitz was boggled. "And is that all you do all day? Sit on each other like that?"

"There is nothing else to do. So we spend our days sitting on each other and discussing philosophy. For instance, just as you showed up, I was advancing the notion that causality is itself the root cause of most events —"

"—Whereas I," the darker alien said, "take the opposing viewpoint, that there can't possibly be any such thing as causality, since nothing of any real importance ever really happens."

"Define importance," the lighter alien countered.

"Define define!" the darker alien said.

The lighter alien addressed Vossoff and Nimmitz. "See? The nihilistic viewpoint belongs to whoever's the chair at the moment. We switch opinions when we switch positions. That way we both get to experience all possible points of view."

"Except phenomenology," said the darker alien. "I hate that."

"No," the lighter alien said, "you only imagine you hate that."

Nimmitz grabbed Vossoff plaintively. "Get me away from this

planet, Ernst. I don't like this place."

"In a minute," Vossoff sympathized. He turned his attention back to the two aliens. "I need to know this: How do you handle the basic necessities of life here?"

The lighter alien looked offended. "Philosophy *is* a basic necessity of life."

"I mean, how can you survive when there's no food here?"

"Ahhhh, that's the highest achievement of our advanced civilization. As we grew increasingly advanced, we also grew increasingly aware that the true mark of advancement was an uncluttered lifestyle. So one day we left our previous highly advanced civilization, used our all-powerful technology to create this planet, and imbued it with all manner of transdimensional mechanisms for supporting our existence here, including the translation program you've already encountered, a field that nourishes life without benefit of food, and—most importantly, given our rigorous aesthetic principles—an accommodation for preserving the physical status quo, which includes among other things regularly purging the landscape of all the annoying superfluous detail that accrues over time."

"Like chairs," the darker alien said. "Or starships."

"Or visitors," said the lighter alien.

"Yes," the darker alien said. "That, too, would be an excellent example."

There was a moment of uncannily uncomfortable silence.

Then the two humans yelped and began to run.

"I thought they'd never leave," said the lighter alien.

"Define never," said his companion the chair.

VOSSOFF AND NIMMITZ GOT BACK TO THEIR SHIP before the planet purged it from the landscape, but they didn't stop hyperventilating until they were safely back in orbit.

"That was close," gasped Nimmitz.

"Yes, it certainly was."

"Are we gonna leave this system now?"

Vossoff chuckled. "Absolutely not, my friend. This planet is a major business opportunity."

Nimmitz stared at him. "I don't get it."

"Weren't you listening at all? A field that nourishes life without recourse to food? Do you know what that would be worth on the open market? Hell, the food service industries alone would pay us several fortunes just to forget what we know!"

"But—that thing which gets rid of starships!"

"The most lucrative weapons system ever devised? What of it? Besides, we're safe. If the mechanism in question is still functional—the safest possible thing to assume, as I freely admit—then that must be because it monitors the planet only intermittently. We were lucky enough to land and take off during its dormant cycle, and we'll continue to be lucky as long we just take the time to determine the length of that cycle."

"I don't know," Nimmitz said. "I don't want to hang around any planet where people sit on each other like that."

But Vossoff was the one who won all their arguments, and so they dropped five probes into the desert, spaced 100 clicks apart. The probes were jet-black and perfectly spherical and they sat on the endless white plain like aloof things that refused to mix. The near nothingness was almost worse than the absolute nothingness that had been there before; it made both Vossoff and Nimmitz yearn for something epic and brilliant to connect the dots. But there wasn't. Just a planet-sized blank piece of paper, as if God Himself had woken up with writer's block.

And, as Nimmitz considerably kept pointing out, a couple of aliens, taking turns being the chair. Zero. The probes sat on the white desert for 32 hours.

And then they disappeared.

No slow fading away, no dramatic light show, no eerie whining noise as the alien cleaning mechanism warmed up—just the five black probes, first there, then not.

Not satisfied at all, Vossoff dropped another five probes into the desert. They each sat in place for 65 hours, then disappeared, between one second and the next. He dropped one more. It disappeared in 65 hours. Another one. It disappeared in 65 hours. One more. Sixty-five hours.

"I think that's clear enough," Vossoff said.

"Yeah," Nimmitz said. "But I still can't believe they sit on each other like that."

"IS THAT A WEAPON?"

From any other advanced sentient it would have been an incredibly stupid question. The blaster was the length of Vossoff's arm and ended in a wicked-looking emission lens that had already partially melted from the backlash of the last six occasions Vossoff had been forced to use it. Neither Vossoff nor Nimmitz really believed they needed the heavy artillery to capture one of the sentients, but they both knew the value of good public relations.

"Yes," Vossoff said. "It is a weapon."

"How fascinating," said the lighter alien. "It has been a long time since either one of us saw a weapon, the entire concept of weaponry being so inherently uncivilized and all."

"You're right about that," Vossoff said, in the gravelly tone of a dangerous man who clearly wanted to be recognized as dangerous. "We are extremely uncivilized. We are morally and ethically in the same league as the barbarians who sacked Rome, and the cads who burned the Great Library of Alexandria, and the Centauri raiders who installed stereo speakers on the Silent Colossus of Parnajan. We have no respect for your ancient advanced civilization, entertain nothing but contempt for your grand and glorious traditions, and wouldn't suffer any guilt about expunging your entire—admittedly, only two-person—population. Therefore, we strongly urge you, as you value your lives, to come with us."

"Why should we do that? You sound like perfectly horrid people."

"Because," Vossoff explained, with perhaps a little more patience than the situation warranted, "being perfectly horrid people, if you don't come with us, we will cruelly and barbarically reduce the two of you to ash."

"The question," pointed out the darker alien, "is how we can intelligently regard ash as a lesser state of being when we who have personally not experienced that transformation have no intelligent basis for comparison. After all, for all we know, ash might be a step up. We need hard data."

VOSSOFF AND Nimmitz looked at each other. The secrets of life and death, all wrapped up in a flaky little biped who liked to sip scotch through a straw.

"I was ash once," said the lighter alien. "I didn't like it much, but everybody has the right to enjoy their own chosen lifestyle."

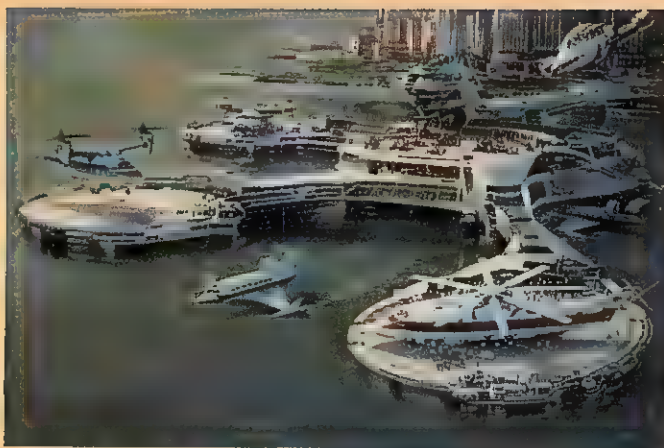
Fed up, Vossoff blasted the darker alien out of existence. The lighter alien seemed to hover in the air a split second before falling to the ground. He did not look particularly upset, or even surprised, as he ran his fingers over the smooth featureless ground.

"Ernst!" Nimmitz shouted. "You shot the guy!"

"Grow up," snarled Vossoff. He turned his attention back to the one surviving alien. "Any questions?"

The alien was still running his fingers over the ground. "Yes," he

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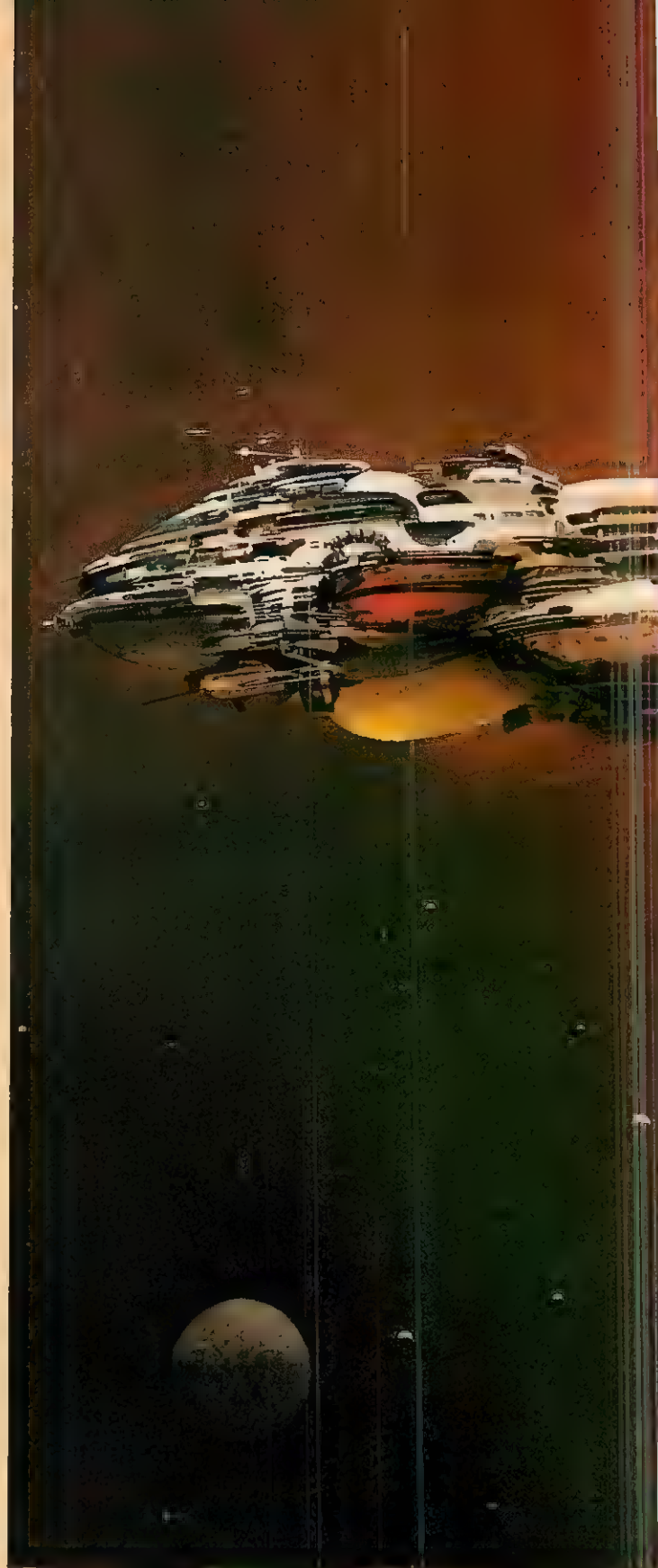


The Forever Warrior considers John Berkey.

BY JOE HALDEMAN

JOHN BERKEY'S PAINTINGS GRAB YOU by the throat and give you a good shake. Huge machines doing momentous things, they are visual mantras to the power of engineering, for good or for dark. They do well what science fiction illustration does best: elicit a sense of wonder.

The Berkey painting I like best is the one of the huge spaceship levitating out of the water, an elaboration of his cover illustration for Mike Scott Rohan's *Run to the Stars*. It evokes terror and wonder at the same time because of the ship's sharklike appearance. You feel as if it's jumping out of the picture at you, feral and deadly, but the background is a wonderfully cool and slick futuristic city scene that says, "Nothing terrible is going to happen. We have everything fixed, up here in the future."

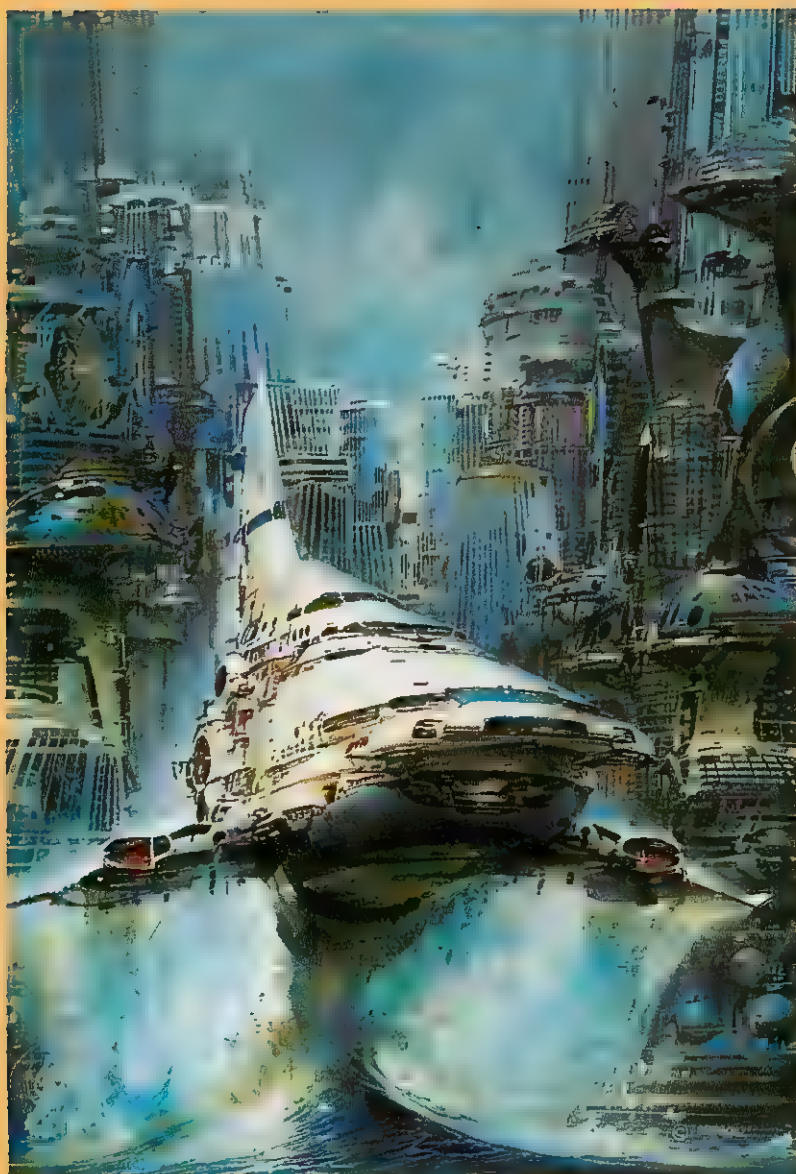


ARCHITECT

Nomad II was commissioned by an international businessman who wanted to mount a painting of a contemporary spaceship inside his own globe-spanning DC-10. LEFT: Berkey's machines seem so true that he can illustrate life as easily as SF illusion, as seen in this illustration done for Popular Mechanics.



OF SPACE



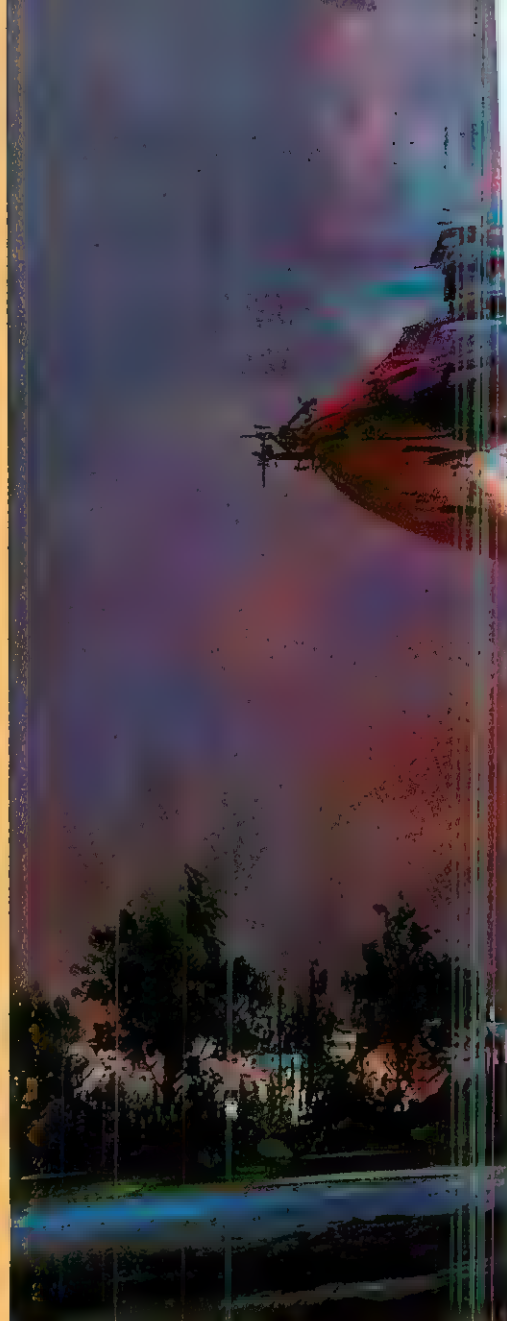
ABOVE: Berkey's joy in creation is so great that he often continues tinkering long after his book covers are published. This painting is of the sister ship to the one that appeared on the cover of Mike Scott Rohan's *Run to the Stars*. TOP RIGHT: Part of Berkey's mystique is his ability to make the improbable seem all too real, as in *Denial 3*, an invasion scene painted for his collector card series recently published by FPG Cards.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Glen Cook's *Star's End* was Berkey's third cover for the author's *Starfishers* series, in which the "fish" represented fusion energy sources.

Another favorite is *Nomad II*, which also has a piscine eeriness. How could a spaceship twist around and look at you like an inquisitive moray eel? The only answer is, Who Cares? It's a great picture.

But it does exemplify a problem I have with science fiction illustration in general. I have a little technical expertise—a degree in astronomy and a stint editing *Astronomy* magazine—and as often as not, even in paintings I like, I find some small or large scientific goof. My problem with *Nomad II* is not the eel-like spaceship (it's the future, after all), but the two planets in the lower left. They're too close together. There are too many other big planets and planetesimals in the picture.

So argue. You could claim that the little





one, for instance, is really the size of a marble, and much closer to the viewer than is the big planet. But that's cheating; that one has slightly less-sharp density of detail, so it must be farther away. The third planet, on the far right seems to complete an equilateral triangle of identical worlds. That's visually neat, but hard to justify in terms of what we know, or think we know, about planetary formation.

So argue again. How do you know that's not possible? Have you seen any other solar systems? No, he says weakly, but we do know how big a planetlike thing has to be before it takes a spherical shape; we know about tidal stresses; we know something about the distribution

of angular momentum in the dust clouds that we assume precede planetary formation. No triangles of planets close together.

So argue yet again. How do you know that some superscientific force didn't bring those three planets together after the fact? Huh? They were originally far apart, but dragged into the same orbit? Huh? Huh?

At this point your science nerd either stares blankly and shuffles away or roars Avagadro's Number and leaps on the questioner with fangs bared.

At the risk of seeming impolite to John Berkey, whom I don't know, I'd like to illustrate the point with a story about another artist.

Kelly Freas illustrated the *Analog* version of *The Forever War*, still my most successful novel. He and I got the cover illustration for the first installment, a novella called "Hero."

A couple of years after that appeared, I got Kelly to sign a copy of it for me. He signed it and handed it back and said, "Say, did you

catch the scientific error there?"

I looked at the picture. "Sure...the bright stars are in the center of dim crosses of light. That's an artifact that appears on astronomical photographs because the diagonal support of a Newtonian reflector has four vanes."

"Huh?" he said, and walked away.

I just looked at my copy of the painting and I still can't figure out what else is wrong with it!

But Berkey doesn't have to defend himself against this kind of anal-retentive detail mania. The reason for those two worlds on the left in *Nomad II* is simple, and has nothing to do with suppositions about planetary formation. Cover them up with one hand and you have what artists call "negative space," and it's unbalanced; it's like a guy in an elegant suit with his fly unzipped. Zip up the fly and he's a guy in a suit. Put something solid in the negative space and the painting flies.

One thing Berkey does better than most



*ABOVE: This untitled painting, published here for the first time, shows the sort of work Berkey does purely for his own pleasure when he needs to relax. FAR RIGHT: One reason Berkey's covers convince readers to buy books is their absolute believability, as this painting Substance and Spirit, originally done for the novel *The Endless Future*, proves.*

science fiction artists is muted light effects. Most people paint nebulae and galaxies straight from long-exposure observatory photographs. That's no more real than a time-lapse movie of a flower blossoming. No one's unaided eye can see either, no matter where they are in space.

It's true that a star will be four times as bright if you cut the distance to it in half. But extended objects, like nebulae, don't get brighter as you get closer to them. (Move toward a well-lit wall and tell me how close you have to get before it blinds you.) The mathematical explanation for this is clear and elegant, and you will find it in the fine print of one of this issue's advertisements.

A case in point is Berkey's cover for Glen Cook's *Star's End*. I like the picture both for the sense-of-wonder fantastic power of it, and, at the other end of some scale, its visual humor. All those sharklike spermatozoa converging on the egg, with the dying space station—OK, I'm stretching—some sort of ineffective birth control device (*Woman Hospitalized As IUD Bursts Into Flame*). I don't know whether Berkey meant this as a joke, or was subconsciously responding to something deep and Freudian, but it's a kick no matter which.

What's interesting in astronomical terms is the gray nebula above the planet or ovum. That's the way such things actually look, beautiful but subtle. This one resembles the Rosette Nebula, which is a complex marvel of fine structure in a time exposure, colors and swirls. But in real life it looks like this.

I admire his restraint but don't really condemn other artists who exaggerate in the



direction of beauty and drama, even if they know better. After all, if I just wrote about life as I know it to be, all my stories would be about some schnook who spends all day behind a word processor, drinking coffee.

It's interesting that Berkey came by this restraint, evidently, out of artistic instinct rather than concern for scientific accuracy. He says, "A space picture is the least disciplined painting that I do.... It's also the most fun. In most commissioned work I worry about the painting being accurate. That the factual elements are correct. This is not so in the paintings of the future or fantasy. The hope there is that it looks correct and that the suggestion is completed by the viewer."

It's an attitude that would make Chesley Bonestell, with all his study and analysis, somewhere between uneasy and horrified. Yet you can't deny the worth of the results. Berkey deals in sense of wonder, not science, and he delivers the goods. □

Freed from a cosmic zoo, *Moonshadow* seeks the secrets of the universe.

SF stars from Bradbury to Vonnegut considered *Moonshadow* a classic. Art by John J. Muth.



THE RETURN OF *MOONSHADOW*, A FAIRY TALE For Grown-Ups should give comic lovers everywhere cause to breathe a sigh of pleasure. This graphic novel—with a definite emphasis on the word *novel*—by writer J.M. DeMatteis and artist John J. Muth, originally appeared during 1985 and 1986 in the form of 12 issues of a bimonthly comic book magazine. Vertigo will give *Moonshadow* new life over the next year as it re-releases the original volumes with all new covers.

Moonshadow's first incarnation stirred up plenty of positive critical reaction in its time. No less a luminary than Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. wrote that it was "perfectly beautiful." Ray Bradbury considered it "beautiful, original, haunting." And Frank Miller said, "It's lovely. It makes you feel better about comics."

At its most simple level *Moonshadow* appears to be a picaresque interstellar romp. It has spaceships, evil empires and very weird aliens aplenty. What you will also find here is a unique, individual artistic expression, a singular reading experience. Not just literate, *Moonshadow* aims to transcend all commercial publishing boundaries and strikes freely into the realm of high literature.

The story follows Moonshadow, a boy in his mid-teens, child of Sunflower, a Brooklyn-born daughter of the '60s. His "father" is a capricious and omnipotent

energy being, who looks much like a smirking Pacman. Moonshadow leaves the cosmic zoo where he was raised, riding off in a private starcraft on a romantic quest for adventure and the search for the meaning of existence.

The teen's most constant companion is the decidedly unromantic, lecherous alien dubbed Ira: a Falstaff to *Moonshadow's* Prince Hal, "a hairy sensualist who cared for nothing save filling his belly and fondling his genitals." Ira variously plays the role of stand-in father figure, mentor, buffoon, Judas, villain, and tragic victim. Other players making regular appearances over the course of the hero's journey include the ghosts of Sunflower, her mad Aunt Ettie, and a Vietnam casualty who sports a bullet hole as a third eye. There is also the ever-present pet cat, "Frodo," who plays no apparently significant role, but survives to accompany Moonshadow into old age!

This is a painted comic book and artist Muth employs a variety of modes from panel to panel, ranging from pencil sketches with wash, to full watercolors which you can almost touch, to what looks like heavy, traditionally modeled oil paintings. In places Muth lets the colors become overly gray and murky, flattening out the energy of the story. But generally his tasteful, sure touch adds to the sense that this is a mature, artful comic, meant to be regarded in all seriousness.

He is at his best in gentle, slightly melancholy, pastoral scenes and at his weakest in the depiction of spaceships and other forms of hard gadgetry. His work shines a light on the innocent humanism of the story and, perhaps intentionally, underplays the potentially distracting science fiction props and settings.

The story's narrator is Moonshadow himself, now a frail white-bearded eccentric, writing about his youth many decades earlier. This older self appears at the beginning of every one of the 12 "books" that make up the novel, quoting extensively from his favorite authors, which include Blake, Keats, Shelley and Tolkien. *Moonshadow* is fully shaped through the voice of its elderly narrator. This is a richly poetic, philosophical and wistful voice; one that is searching for truth and understanding.

His narrative jumps about in time and place, mixing in memories, ideas and whimsical asides; and the voice provides an almost Zen interconnectedness among the various experiences presented. It's a tour-de-force of layered storytelling and language from writer DeMatteis, filled with a love of the written word, imagination, and the scope of literature. He provides us with two central characters for the price of one—they interact both in the written narrative and visually on the page—the visions of the old Moonshadow and the youthful one compound into a sum greater than its parts.

Through his varying artistic styles, Muth sharpens the focus on some scenes and makes others distant and sketchy. The visuals make connections between scenes which otherwise stretch across large gaps in time and space, subtly linking together the layers of the narrative.

In such a language-reliant story the art isn't as inte-

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gral to the storytelling process as is usually found in modern comics. Muth's role is a little closer to that of a simple illustrator. Sometimes he creates the illusion that we are peering at a children's picture book, while he is actually acting as a subtle setter of mood and director of emotion.

It's interesting to see how the paintings often create a counterpoint to the text. The visuals play it straight during many passages of wild absurdity; and then, conversely, add touches of humor to moments that threaten to become unbearably grim—such as the picture of Moonshadow straitjacketed in a lunatic asylum with his cat Frodo at his side, also strapped into a jacket, a look of wide-eyed shock on the cat's face.

Moonshadow is full of humor, some of it low-keyed, based on character and situation, much of it wildly outrageous and slapstick—and all of it unabashedly mixed into the serious, poetic threads of the story.

DeMatteis presents alternately ridiculous and malevolent characters with absurd names, like King Macha, lord of Machovia (who likes to bop his friends on the head with an enormous sausage), Queen Dibbich, Lady Shady and her husband Lord Bord, Jobidiah, Flodibiah and Povidiah Unkshuss (the last of these leads an authoritarian religion which has no stated set of beliefs). While the humans are rendered in a soft, almost classical mode, the artist shows many of the strangely named aliens as grotesque cartoons, drawn in a kind of gonzo Ralph Steadman style. Opposed to all this are the totally serious flashbacks to Sunflower's formative '60s youth, a kind of gospel upon which the narrator was raised, not to mention serious encounters with death, war, insanity and sexuality.

Moonshadow is not a book which will please all readers. The wild mixing of elements might be too much. Some will wish to get on with action, disliking DeMatteis' preference for detours of memory and introspection. Others will get annoyed with the fact that every bit of good luck for the hero is inevitably followed by a crushingly awful turn of events.

And there may be a whole category of readers who will be turned off by the use of the hippy-era '60s as a touchstone of experience for Moonshadow, as he constantly reflects back on his mother's stories of her youth.

It's often claimed that no great works of literature have yet been created around the '60s experience. Perhaps *Moonshadow* points in the right direction for encompassing the tenor of such a confusing, chaotic era by means of a freewheeling knitting together of so many seemingly opposing elements.

In an artfully innocent way, DeMatteis doesn't even try to stick to one storytelling approach. Like the spirit of the '60s, he embraces the holy, the profane, and the goofy all at one time. The book shows strong touches of satire, the absurd, parable, tall

tales, farce, coming-of-age adventure, '60s new wave science fiction, magical realism, children's fairy tales, Elizabethan theater, and on and on.

One pictures the writer as an omnivorous reader who's put something of everything he cares about into his story. The least of his influences seems to be comic books. It is surprising, then, to read DeMatteis' bio and see that he has scripted such super hero standards as *Spider-Man* and *Captain America*.

So it is a pleasure to once more have the creatively generous and unique *Moonshadow* with us. This is one of those examples the comic lover can recommend to skeptical friends to demonstrate the vast—though generally underutilized—potential of the medium. *Moonshadow*, *A Fairy Tale For Grown-Ups* is that rich kind of book that can be dipped into over and over again, to reread individual scenes or to start again from the beginning. □

RECENT AND RECOMMENDED

•Jean-Claude van Damme comes to the silver screen in *Timecop* this fall, and *Timecop* the comic book series will be coming to your local comics shop at around the same time. *Timecop* (Dark Horse Comics, full color, 32 pages), the brainchild of Mark Verheiden in both of its incarnations, tells the story of a future in which time travel has become real and of a past that must be protected from being changed by time travelers. Max Walker is an agent for the TEC (Time Enforcement Commission), sworn to ensure that time travel is not misused. His first assignment takes him back to the stock market crash of 1929, where he must bring in an ex-partner gone bad. Along the way, Walker discovers that a racist presidential candidate may be mixed up in a conspiracy to bend the future beyond recognition. The non-stop action and witty repartee is courtesy of Mark Verheiden, who provided the script, while Ron Randall handled the art chores.

•Regular readers of SF comics will remember anti-hero Marshall Law, about whose futuristic antics Trina Robbins wrote, "This is *Watchmen* on a bad acid trip." The leather-and barbed-wire garbed Marshall stalked the streets of San Futuro in search of super heroes gone bad. "Killing is my business," was one of his mottos. "Business is good." Writer Pat Mills and artist Kevin O'Neill return to the gritty and unforgiving world of the future that makes cyberpunk look like a Barney film festival with *Suicida* (Blackball Comics, full color, 32 pages, \$2.50). *Suicida* is the leader of San Futuro's meanest street gang, Gangreen, made up of combat-hardened ex-super heroes who have returned from a foreign war to a future America that does not want them. *Suicida* has long been a nemesis of Marshall Law, this volume provides background on the war-time experiences that have linked Marshall Law and *Suicida* together forever. *Suicida* is only recommended for mature audiences.

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ago." He fidgeted as Lynn sobbed, covering her face with her normal hand. "Look—all we had was one date, and we both knew we weren't right for each other. Why are you taking this so hard?"

Lynn reached for a nearby box of tissues and blew her nose. "When Amy died," she said, "I was glad I had 10 years with her, and that I really got to know who she was. I feel good about that. But when you died, I kept seeing your face, all the time. I kept remembering things we'd talked about. I kept remembering how genuine you were, and upbeat." She shrugged. "But the hardest part is that I'll never really know what I've lost."

"Jesus, Lynn," Paul said, rolling his eyes. "You've got to get out more."

She laughed, looking down at the tissue in her hand. "I wish you really were here. I know I've just been imagining you all along, and I guess I must have a pretty good imagination. The things you say to me are just like you, but they're not what I would think of on my own."

She took a deep breath. "Sometimes I can't bear to be with you, because it reminds me how I felt when I found out that you'd been killed. And other times, I can't bear to be without you, because you've become a good friend."

She shook her head, looking down at her hands. "Who am I kidding? I know you're not real. I'm just making you up."

Lynn didn't believe in ghosts, but she'd been afraid to say it out loud for fear that Paul would disappear and not come back.

When she looked up, Paul gave her his best deadpan expression. "Lynn, if you want me to go," he said dryly, "just say so."

She grinned.

Later that night, he lay next to her in bed in the dark.

"Paul?" Lynn said. She faced away from him, curled up on her side. She could still sense his presence.

"Mmm," he said, snuggling up behind her.

"I wanted to kill him tonight. Evan, I mean. It would have been so easy."

"But you didn't," Paul murmured.

"I'm so afraid of killing someone just because they killed someone I cared about."

"Then keep worrying," Paul said. "And it'll probably never happen."

She thought about something Paul had said last week, and realized he was right. Doing nothing but working and staying shut in at home was no life. It was time to go out in the world again.

Lynn felt herself fading. "Will you stay with me through the night?"

Paul embraced her gently. "I'll stay as long as you need me."

She couldn't tell whether the tingling sensation along her left arm was the ache of her gunhand or Paul's hand brushing against her skin.

Maybe it didn't really matter.

Lynn fell asleep, embracing the arms she was willing to bear. □

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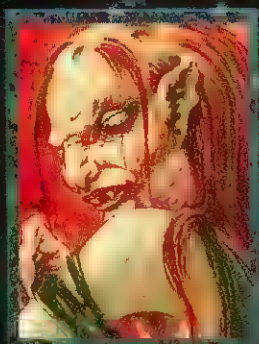
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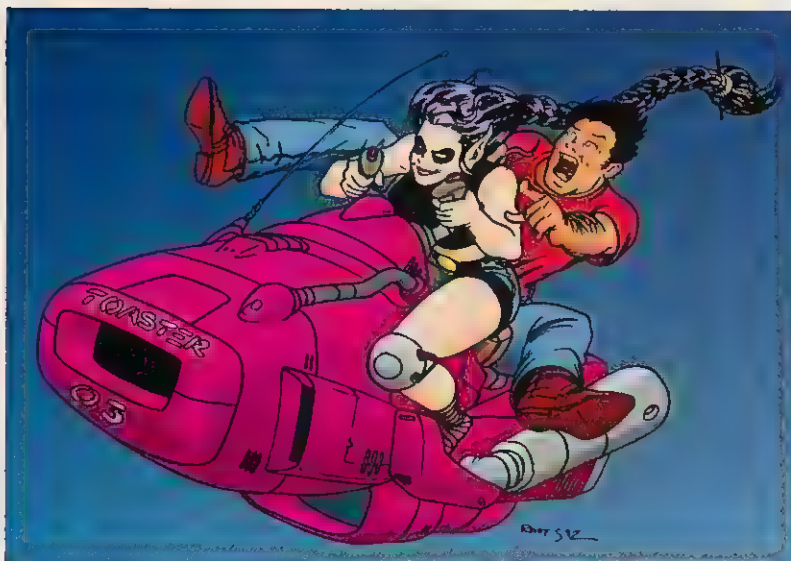
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By David M. Honigsberg

Star Riders sends up SF with serious space opera silliness.



In the far-flung future, your goal is to find the coolest planet in the galaxy—Earth.

MANY ROLE-PLAYING GAMES TAKE THEMSELVES very seriously.

Their magic systems are impeccable, their weapons specifications carefully researched, and their method for allocating the necessary character or experience points well thought out.

This is not the case with Hans Guevin's *Star Riders*, published by the Canadian company Ianus Games, which is billed as "a wild space opera comedy game." Compatible with their *Teenagers From Outer Space* system, this book is, for the most part, a joy to read, almost to the point of laughing until crying.

From the very outset, the tone is made perfectly clear. The credits page is entitled "Those Responsible" and contains such personalities as Hans "What?! I have to write it AGAIN?!" Guevin (writer), Jean "You have to write it AGAIN!" Carrieres (copy editor) and Benoit "What?! I have to lay it out AGAIN?!" Ouellette (art director). This is not a game system which takes itself seriously. It's just as well. The given story line can bend the meaning of the term "suspension of disbelief."

It seems that in the far-flung future, Earth is by far the coolest place to be and, by extension, Earthlings the coolest people in the galaxy. Unfortunately, the Dadourunrun Empire, the Independents, and a group called the Conundrum went to war over who had the most interesting place to spend a vacation. Before Earth knew what had happened, it was a part of the Dadourunrun Conundrum Empire and, except for the change from dollars to credits, all went along as before.

Because the galaxy was so disorganized, a group comprised of high officials of the empire decided that something had to be done, and thus the Big B.A.N.G. (Big Bureaucratic Affairs of Nebular Generalization) was formed, their mission to clean up the galaxy and

rearrange it nicely and symmetrically. They placed all the stars at equal distances from one another and bumped some unwanted planets into the Unknown Universe, mostly the boring and annoying ones.

Earth being such a big attraction, everybody was quite surprised when it vanished into Unknown Space. No records were kept of its new whereabouts, so nobody knows where to find it. Even so, because Earth was such a cool place, its disappearance has only helped to fuel a new wave of interest in it. Finding the Earth is the basis of *Star Riders*.

If this sounds a little bit far-fetched, it's important to remember that the most important part of this game is simply to have fun...and to laugh a lot. Great stock is put into objectives such as being invited to the best parties, not being embarrassed, attracting babes and, of course, finding the whereabouts of Earth.

The weapons are just as silly, dealing their damage in units called "bonks." The GP-05 Plasma Egg Thrower, for example, delivers 3 bonks of damage, while the MegaPlus (TM) Hand Bomb delivers all of the bonks a character can take, plus lots of property damage, even taking away the need for light bulbs "...for a few years, as you now glow in the dark!"

What's even better is that no character in *Star Riders* can ever die. Those brought to negative bonks gain one bonk per turn until they're in the black again. During the negative time, they "...stand there...looking stupid and unable to do anything while everybody around you gets to do lots of nifty stuff."

Rolling the character is very easy, since all stats are rolled on one six-sided die. Here again, the light-hearted nature of the game shines forth—the stats are, in order, Smarts, Bod, Relationship with Pals, Luck, Driving (very important in a game where light years can separate adventure points), Looks, Cool and Bonk. After the character is rolled, points can be moved from any stat to any other, so long as no stat falls below one nor any rise above six.

Whereas a number of other role-playing systems describe advantages and disadvantages, *Star Riders* allows the players to choose their own Knacks and Traits, although dice are employed to determine the powers that a character has (aliens get more powers than do humans, but humans are from Earth and they're cool, so who cares if they have powers?). Knacks range from Know About Earth Stuff and Whine & Wheedle to Tie-dye Referee's Cat. Up to six points (a die roll) can be assigned to as many Knacks as a player desires.

Traits run the gamut from Cowardly to Abrasive and, toward the end of the list, "Has to Have the Last Word, Repetitive, Has to Have the Last Word, Repetitive, HAS TO HAVE THE LAST WORD!!" Three traits can be chosen, although the rules caution against choosing unwisely: "...make sure you ask yourself, 'Can I really play a schizoid party animal who talks to trees?'"

A few more dice rolls to determine the type of ship a

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character has, how fast it goes, its "cool miscellaneous stuff" and its bonks, and the players are on their way to adventures of a most bizarre nature.

A number of important non-player characters are provided, who feature prominently in plot outlines given in sections entitled "The Star Riders' Wild Stories" and "Star Riders Episode Guide." The problem with these sections is that the plots incorporate the non-player characters in such detail that it seems as if the system is encouraging players to take on the personas of Leroy, Tabada, Dwayne DeBley and others instead of exploring their own characters.

A sampling of alien races is also provided, such as the annoying Nowits, who are truly omniscient; the unsavory Schlobs; and even the enigmatic Toaster, which comes with a three-year warranty and has the ability to throw toast out of everyone's reach.

Improvement points, *Star Riders'* answer to experience points, are determined by a committee comprised of the players and the referee. The performance of each adventure is rated from zero to three, and the points are added up and averaged, with fractions being rounded up. While this is an ingenious way of assigning character points, there may be too much temptation by the players to grant themselves high marks all the time, so much so that lower marks from the referee are not sufficient to pull down the average.

Sidebars on many pages add to the color of the system by providing brief glimpses into places such as Doone, the planet which has the greatest beach in the universe but not a drop of water, and the space station Bab-E-Loon 5-0, which has been rebuilt five times.

What is otherwise a truly fun read and an enjoyable system to adventure in is marred by a number of flaws. The most irresponsible of these is a singular lack of careful proofreading. It seems that a spell-checker was used in lieu of passing the final manuscript by human eyes. How else to explain minor errors such as 'though' instead of 'tough,' 'event' instead of 'even,' and 'the' instead of 'they.' This does not usually make passages unreadable, but it does take a moment to wrest the full meaning out of some sentences. Other enigmatic passages, such as a reminder that "...the Referee should make the absolute must to act as if he didn't care...." are more problematic and might make readers wonder if the text were originally written in another language. There are many who feel that game-writing is a lower form of writing, but there is no need for companies such as Ianus to add easily-combustible fuel to that debate.

There are two other areas of greater import where proofreading is lacking. The first, in the otherwise well-written section on determining what kind of ship the character will use, calls for a roll of two six-sided dice, with the majority of ships tending toward Shapeless Boxes (3-5) or Flying Saucers (6-8). The problem with this chart is that there

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is an entry for Jet Cycle, which is granted on a roll of one. Nowhere are modifiers to this roll mentioned and most characters will find it nothing less than impossible to roll a one on two six-sided dice.

Second, a frustrating error of omission occurs in one of the best of the Wild Stories provided, an adventure entitled "Big!" in which the characters find themselves in the nursery of an immense toddler, their spaceship having been "...sucked away by the most monstrous vacuum cleaner ever in existence." An important part of this adventure revolves around the possibility that a passing nurse will kick up enough wind to sweep a character away to another area of the room. The rules for the adventure list the different compass points indicated by a die roll and state that the appropriate directions will be found on the nursery map. The map, however, does not have any indication of these directions.

One last problem should be mentioned. Throughout the entire course of the game, rolls are made on either one or, more rarely, two six-sided dice. This effort should be applauded, since many role-playing systems still require players to cart around bags of variable shaped dice. Yet in another excellent adventure, "The Case of the Mistaken Idol," a roll of 1-10 is called for to determine what events occur in Asimov's Pub & Tavern. This is the only instance of a dice roll being made on anything other than a square

die, and it would have been better constructed as a 2-12 table instead.

None of these proves to be a fatal drawback to the game, but they are things which should have been caught before the book went to print or, in the case of the above-mentioned chart, thought out with more care. Even so, *Star Riders* can be a great deal of fun and is recommended for those who feel the need to take a break, even for a short while, from serious adventures. □

RECENT AND RECOMMENDED

•If you've ever wanted to test-drive the Batmobile, step through the Boom Tube of the New Gods into another dimension, or pierce time itself with Rip Hunter's Time Sphere, now's your chance. Writer Jerry A. Novick has produced the *DC Technical Manual* (Mayfair Games, Inc., trade paperback, 160 pages), a comprehensive study of the current state of technology among the super heroes and super villains of the DC Comics universe. Written in the form of a top secret annual report provided by S.T.A.R. (Scientific and Technological Advanced Research) Labs, a fictional entity in the DC Universe, the volume contains the background and statistics that would allow you to introduce into your role-playing games the miraculous machines that make men and women into heroes. Where else could you purchase a Thangarian Anti-Gravity Belt, first worn on Earth by Hawkman, a full range

of the Green Arrow's bows and arrows, or each of the Penguin's dastardly umbrellas? This volume is full of the cosmic gizmos that SF fans have always loved, ready to be introduced into play in any gaming universe.

•It's time to see the U.S.A. the cyberpunk way! *Land of the Free* (R. Talsorian) is a new cross-country adventure set in the dark future of *Cyberpunk 2020*, which we first introduced to you as the lead feature of the Games department of our September 1993 issue. This time, players form a team of intrepid cyberpunks on a marathon trek across the battered landscape of future America, encountering renegade military officers, bizarre cults, power-hungry megacorporations and the various cultures into which our country has fractured. The goal is to deliver alive a scientist's daughter, who has on her own made vast leaps in the field of bioregeneration, from the gritty streets of New York to Night City on the opposite coast. One misstep, and her secrets could cost you the lives of your entire team. The boxed module contains a 120-page trade paperback adventure book, a 2 by 3-foot map of the United States as it appears after the horrors of the future, and all sorts of extras the gamesmaster can use to bring the adventure to life. *Land of the Free* should take four to eight sessions to play, depending on the length of the sessions and the cleverness of the players. Survive and you'll have learned what cyberpunk is all about.

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BOOKS

Continued from page 16

the Goddess Mother will really help her, she fails in her priestess training: all her blessings backfire, all her magic charms curse. Ashamed, she travels from town to town selling curses and leaving before witnessing the ensuing havoc. As the story opens, she is attacked by bandits with rape on their minds and rescued by a wise swordswoman, Myrrah, who lives nearby. Geyth ends up breaking her word to Myrrah, thus learning the hard way about trust and honor, but the end result is a transformation not just of her character but of her magical ability.

"Images of Love" by Larry Tritten is my favorite in the collection. It doesn't take itself too seriously and is, I think, very funny. (Humor is very subjective, of course.) Tritten's language is "elevated," the tone is arch, and Saran's ladyfriend Clarity's magic is very unusual and integral to the story. A ramblin' man, Saran had not expected to ever find true love, or to even want it. With women being so delightful and there being so many women, why fuss about any one in particular? He learns the joy and pain of such singular love, and loss as well, and is the wiser for it.

The humans "behaving like humans" in "Spirit Singer," by Diana L. Paxson, are not dealing with simple emotions. Paxson's story echoes Ulysses and includes an evil stepmother, a wisewoman, and our abused, orphaned, narrator, the child Bera. Set in a quasi-historical Scandinavian setting, in the time of the Vikings, its sense of place is very strong and real. The mythic elements give it additional psychological weight. Bera is illegitimate and motherless. Her father, the king, has been away on a quest. If he is dead, Bera's half brother (under the influence of the evil stepmother) wants to become the new leader. He calls in a wisewoman, who will use her "sight" to determine if Bera's father is dead or not. In the course of her visit, the wisewoman not only discovers the truth, but teaches Bera what her true calling is.

"Barbarian Legacy," by Lawrence Schimel, also echoes myth, this time the story of Baba Yaga. Ilyana has been left alone, all the other townspeople having fled the harsh winter and the threat of even harsher barbarians. Ilyana has remained behind with her hens, with barely enough food. Much to her surprise one morning, the henhouse has grown legs and has become rather skittish and afraid. Even more surprising is what eventually emerges from the henhouse. Many of the stories in this collection involve parents and children, for the most part unhappily. It was nice—but I'm hoping to not ruin the ending—to discover a story that ends with the promise of parent-child love and healing.

"Tales" by Javonna L. Anderson, a first sale, is the other kind of story, where parents and children do not find help and healing in each other. The queen-mother in

Anderson's story is telling her children a story about a princess that the reader realizes is herself. The dialogue between the mother and children is wonderful. The children sound like children, the interweaving of voices is great, and the pace keeps moving right along. But the reader is really not given enough background to understand the Queen's final, despairing decision.

It would be impossible to mention all 33 stories, but I'll quickly note that Deborah Wheeler and Dave Smeds have good stories, with complex human relationships and fantasy backgrounds, in which, once again, fathers and daughters have great trouble understanding each other. A couple of stories even have dragons—Mary Catelli's "Thief, Thief" and Kathy Ann Trueman's "The Sow's Ear." In both cases the stories are amusing and original. Finally, I liked "Song-healer" by Tammi Labrecque, even though the initial setup of conflict—a "failed" student of magic running away from school—is never fully developed. Tynril discovers a wisewoman in the forest, echoes of many an old story, and learns healing from her, becoming a great healer herself. Even though I kept waiting for "them" to find her and nothing ever happened, I enjoyed this story—the scenes of magical healing were well done and the characters were nice people.

We should all be nice people, look inside ourselves for our true worth, and respect our wise elders. And enjoy Marion Zimmer Bradley's latest collection of heroic fiction.

Rachel Russell

RECENT AND RECOMMENDED

•Harlan Ellison is more than just a writer, he's a phenomenon, and his latest publication is more than just a book, it's an event. *Mind Fields* (Morpheus International, \$24.95, 10-inch by 12-inch trade paperback, 72 pages) is an artistic collaboration between Ellison, the master of passionate prose, and Jacek Yerka, Polish surrealist whose canvases are reminiscent of Heironymous Bosch and Rene Magritte. When the publisher approached Ellison about doing the foreword for a volume of Yerka's artwork, Ellison was so captivated by the artist's expressive vision that he instead decided to write an original short story for each of the volume's 33 color plates. Readers of *Science Fiction Age* were given a sneak peak at one result of this collaboration in the November 1993 issue with the story and art for "Eruption." The entire volume has just been released, giving readers a glimpse of the full fruits of this marriage of imagination. Ellison's short narrative pieces are full of tenderness, anger, whimsy, rage and other superbly delineated human sensations, running the full Ellisonian trademark gamut of emotions from A to some letter of the alphabet out far beyond Z. Yerka's dreamlike paintings reveal a palette of awe and faith. Together, they form a perfect team. *Mind Fields* is further evidence (if any was

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needed) that Ellison's fiction will remain long after the controversies that have surrounded his persona have faded from recorded memory.

•Not everyone can be a winner, but the proliferation of awards in the genre makes it seem as if there will soon be more trophies in SF than there are potential nominees. Not only are there the two big guns of the Hugo and Nebula Awards, but there are also awards commemorating Philip K. Dick, Theodore Sturgeon, Arthur C. Clarke and John W. Campbell, as well as others for Canadian SF, British SF and so on. How does the serious SF reader keep track of the best of the best? Aurel Guilemette has done the hard work of making it easy for the rest of us by writing *The Best in Science Fiction: Winners and Nominees of the Major Awards in Science Fiction* (Ashgate Publishing, hardcover, 380 pages, \$39.50), which includes almost everything you'd ever want to know about a SF award. Information is not only listed chronologically, but is also cross-indexed by author and title, so if you're in the mood to find out how many awards Orson Scott Card or Michael Bishop have been nominated for, you can do so quickly. My one quibble over Guilemette's selection criteria is that any award that has not been handed out for at least five years has been omitted, which left one of the worthiest of the new awards, the James Tiptree Jr. Memorial Award, lost in space. Still, the book is an invaluable research tool and a welcome addition to the bookshelf of any serious fan of SF.

•The world can survive unfinished symphonies, but nothing will make the blood of a SF or fantasy fan boil like an unfinished trilogy. Imagine how readers of Tolkein's *The Lord of the Rings* would have grieved had *The Return of the King* never appeared. Fans of writer P. C. Hodgell have been in a state of despair for almost a decade. Volume One of her trilogy, *God Stalk*, appeared from Berkley Books in 1982, and the second volume, *Dark of the Moon*, followed in 1985. Readers eagerly awaited the conclusion of Jame's quest to find a place for herself and her twin brother, Tori, among the Kencyrs, the warrior-magicians she'd been hunting for the two previous volumes. Unfortunately for her readers, Hodgell's own quest for a Ph.D took precedence over her fictional creations, but now that her doctorate on Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* has been completed, she is able to welcome you to her world once more. *Seeker's Mask* (Hypatia Press, leather bound hardcover \$60.00, deluxe slipcased \$125.00, 474 pages) brings the long-awaited trilogy to a conclusion. A mass market publisher has not yet picked up the volume, but Hodgell's many fans won't mind paying the price for this handsome limited edition to find out whether her heroes and heroines live happily ever after. The illustrated volume is signed by the author and contains an introduction by fellow fantasist Charles de Lint.

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SENTIENTS TALKING

Continued from page 77

said. "Where's the ash?"

"There's no ash. The disintegration is too thorough. The ash was just a convenient hyperbole I used to help you visualize your own destruction."

"Ahhh. We used to have hyperboles, too, but we eventually rejected them as uncivilized. Unfortunately, it still leaves me without a chair. Which of you two gentlemen is going to volunteer?"

Nimmitz stepped back. "I ain't going to be a chair for nobody!"

Vossoff addressed the alien with the exaggerated care of any man speaking to a highly civilized idiot. "You miss the point. I am taking you prisoner. You are coming to my starship and you are going to tell me all the secrets of your advanced technology, because if you don't, I'm going to shoot you next."

"Then *nobody* will have a chair."

"Which will be wonderfully convenient, since there won't be anybody left on the planet to need a chair."

"Well, there is that," the alien conceded.

"You're getting on my nerves. I'm going to count to 10 and then give you the same treatment I gave your friend. One. Two. Three..."

"There are chairs back on the ship!" Nimmitz cried.

It was the first time Nimmitz had opened his mouth during the negotiations, and the first time the alien seemed at all impressed by anything. "Soft chairs?"

"Sure!" Nimmitz said.

"The kind which lean back, so I can put my feet up?"

"Absolutely."

"And vibrating cushions to gently ease away all my stress and tension like an entirely new adventure in comfort and bliss?"

"Hey," Nimmitz said expansively, "would I lie to you?"

"Well, then, why didn't you say so in the first place? It shall be an honor and privilege being taken prisoner by you." And with that, the alien stood up and sided with Nimmitz.

Vossoff put his hand over his eyes.

Nimmitz gave him a pitying look. "That's your problem, Ernst. You just got to know how to talk to people."

THEY'D BEEN INTERROGATING the alien aboard their ship for almost three days. He didn't mind, since he just loved lounging in Nimmitz's favorite recliner, basking in the heat of an ultraviolet lamp while sipping a tall glass of Vossoff's favorite scotch through a straw. "This is what I call a chair. Have I said that yet? Well, nevermind. The eternal verities bear repeating. This is what I call a chair. It's highly decadent, and it hugs the back in a downright uncivilized way, but

definitely, this... is... what I call a chair."

He'd made that speech, or some reasonably close variant, an average of once an hour since coming on board.

"I'm going to kill him," muttered Nimmitz.

"Just give me another hour. I promise you I'll make some progress." Vossoff turned his attention toward the alien. "You hear what's going on? My partner wants to shoot you. I'm the only thing holding him back. If you're smart, you'll cooperate."

"I know this routine," the alien said. "Good Sentient, Bad Sentient, right? Excellent for interrogation. My people used the technique, too, before we got civilized."

"Try to pay attention to me, please. Last night we established that your extra-dimensional nourishment thingie operates on another plane of existence?"

"Yes. The mechanism—excuse me while I fluff these cushions—is run by the same highly advanced management protocol that keeps the amount of surface detail on the planetary surface an absolute constant. This is highly convenient, though it is, of course, hard on material things like chairs."

"And living organisms?"

"Oh, certainly. Were there any more than two creatures on the planet during any one of its periodic sweeps, the mechanism would eliminate them as superfluous detail."

Vossoff and Nimmitz looked at each other. The secrets of life and death, all wrapped up in a flaky little biped who liked to sip scotch through a straw. "Can we access this mechanism?" Vossoff asked.

"Why would you want to do a silly thing like that?"

"Because I have the weapon," Vossoff said.

The alien paused to consider that. "Very well. I have lost track of time. How long before the next cycle?"

Vossoff checked his chronometer. "Ten of our hours."

"Then," said the alien, "I will help you access the mechanism in 10 hours."

IT WAS TWO MINUTES BEFORE THE purification cycle, and Nimmitz was growing increasingly nervous.

"Listen, Ernst. I say we drop him off on the planet, take off, and get the hell out of this system as fast as we can."

Vossoff emitted laughter. "You've never been a smart man, but I never thought you were a coward. The profit—"

"Profit, shmofit. This whole deal stinks of Things Man Was Not Meant to Know."

"You're that scared of a little risk?"

"This isn't a little risk. Little risks are golden idols. Illicit drugs. Old comic books. Not highly advanced technology from an Ancient Civilization Far More Advanced Than Man. We could end up getting blasted to ash."

"Well," Vossoff said, merrily enough, "never having been ash, we don't have a basis for comparison. It might be a step up."

"Ernst—"

"I don't want to hear it!" Vossoff snapped,

in the same dangerous tone he'd used when threatening the two lazy-butt aliens. "You want to be a small-timer forever, that's your business! But I've waited all my life for a score like this, and I'm not letting you blow it!"

"Excuse me," the alien said.

They both whirled at the sound of his voice. He'd been napping in the command chair, which he'd already said was even more comfortable than Nimmitz's lounge; by far, he said, the most spectacular decadent seating arrangement he'd encountered in his many millennia of existence. For a being from an ancient and highly advanced civilization that had evolved past the need for chairs, he really did seem to have a one-track mind on the subject. It had been a relief to take a break from his interrogation, so they didn't have to listen to him. Vossoff said, "Yes?"

"The cleaning cycle starts in 40 of your seconds," said the alien. "The interface has informed me it's available for reprogramming."

Vossoff all but leaped to the alien's side. "All right! Tell it you want command controls!"

"Very well," said the alien. "How do you want it reprogrammed?"

"We want direct access to the nutritional mechanism. And the life-support mechanism. And the planetary purification device."

The alien did a double take. "Oh, is that all?"

"What do you mean, is that all?"

"I thought you were going to ask me something hard."

"We are. We want to profit from the secrets of your ancient and highly advanced civilization."

"But you don't need me for that," the alien said. "You're going to start benefiting from them in 20 seconds."

"What do you mean?"

The surface of the planet started pulsating in waves.

"It's searching for us," said the alien.

"What?"

"My companion and I. Remember, it's supposed to keep the degree of surface detail constant. That means replacing anything that gets removed. Without us, it's going to have to come up with the nearest equivalent substitute."

"Sub—"

"Two sentients," the alien said. "Same species."

Vossoff and Nimmitz looked at each other.

"I really do envy you," said the alien sadly.

"Enjoying the benefits of such an ancient and advanced civilization. Me, I'm just going to have to make do, opening a furniture store somewhere...."

WHEN THE LIGHT FADED, VOSSOFF and Nimmitz were standing on the planet's surface, facing each other from five yards apart.

Nimmitz spoke first: "I ain't gonna be the chair." □

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JOE HALDERMAN'S FIRST SF NOVEL *THE Forever War* took the field by storm in the early '70s. It not only won the Hugo, Nebula and Ditmar Awards, but was also translated into a graphic novel. His classic novels since then include *Mind-bridge*, *Tools of the Trade* and *The Hemingway Hoax*. He recently won yet another Nebula for his story "Graves." Haldeman just finished a term as president of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America.

Daniel Marcus has recently sold stories to *IASFM*, *F&SF*, and the mainstream literary magazine *Witness*. His 1992 story *Ghost of A Chance*, published in that latter magazine, was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. His book reviews appear regularly in *Whole Earth Review*, while his movie reviews have appeared in *Boing-Boing*. He is a graduate of Clarion West '92, and is currently finishing up his first novel, *A Crack in Everything*. In his 15-year freelance career, **David Beck's** clients have included the NFL, *Playboy* and McDonald's. His many movie posters include *Under Siege*. He has won numerous awards from the Society of Illustrators and other organizations. His original canvases are avidly collected: The Grateful Dead own 13 or more of his pieces.

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Resa Nelson has three short stories out in bookstores at the moment in the anthologies *Future Boston*, *2041*, and *Infinite Loop*. She would like to thank both the Space Crafts and the Brookville 2 writing workshops for helping her hone her story in this issue. She spent two weeks in Egypt last October researching her third novel, tentatively titled *Late For the Nile*. **Tom Simonton** is a native Oklahoman who during his 20-year career in art has drawn everything from Westerns to children's books. His art resume includes the *Congressional Medal of Honor* trading card series, as well as the SF comic book *Texoma Red* from Fantaco.



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Joel Naprstek has been painting for over 22 years and has a particular interest in SF's older styles and looks. In the past he has taught at the School of Visual Arts, and he is currently teaching at Joe Kubert School. He is hard at work on a graphic novel based on the Flying Tigers for Kitchen Sink. Naprstek is a native of New Jersey.



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BRUCE BOSTON'S LATEST NOVEL *Stained Glass Rain* (Ocean View) has been described as the best novel yet written about the '60s and its drug culture. Forthcoming from this prolific poet is *Sensuous Debris: Selected Poems 1970-1994* from Dark Regions Press. Recent short stories may be found in *Xanadu 2*, *Alien Pregnant By Elvis* and in the soon to be released *Angels!*

Robin Wilson first began publishing SF in 1970, and was one of the founders of the Clarion Science Fiction Writers Workshop. His story in this issue represents a welcome return to the genre fold after a long absence during which he devoted himself to the position of president of California State University at Chico. **Broeck Steadman's** paintings have appeared on the covers of R.L. Stine's last six young adult horror novels from Scholastic Books, including *The Dead Girlfriend*, *The Horrors of the Haunted Museum*, and *Time Raiders*. His 3.5-year-old son and 6-year-old daughter seem unaffected.

Elizabeth Hand will be teaching at Clarion West this summer. Her upcoming novels include *The Dead Bell* and *Glimmering*.

Frederik Pohl has been called "the most consistently able writer that science fiction, in its modern form, has yet produced" by Kingsley Amis, a statement that is backed up by Pohl's 50-year career as writer, editor and agent. His recent novel *The Voices of Heaven* adds to an oeuvre that has won Pohl every major award the SF field has to offer. □

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